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Apache GOLD

A Walt Slade Nove

By BRADFORD SCOT

WINCHESTER LAW FOR NESTERS

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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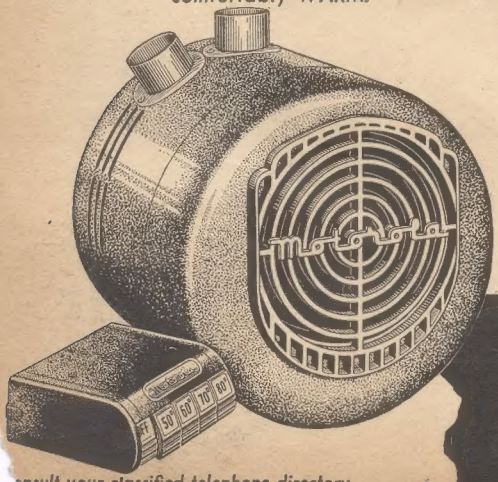

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XLIV, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION January, 1948

A Walt Slade Novel

APACHE GOLD.....*Bradford Scott* **13**
Gun ghosts ride Skeleton Canyon in a cloud of death—until Ranger Slade shows up to clear the air with a storm of trigger lightning!

Two Complete Novelets

CRIMSON SIESTA.....*Johnston McCulley* **50**
Trapped and framed by Bandit Don Roberto, Joel Cardway prepares to face desperate gun odds in a grim powdersmoke fight to the finish!

WINCHESTER LAW FOR NESTERS.....*Walker A. Tompkins* **76**
When a nester camp took root on Sam Branch's ranch he didn't like it—but he gave them a hearing, anyway, while deadly guns roared!

Six Short Stories

FATE'S LITTLE HELPER.....*William O'Sullivan* **36**
Peewee Selden believed in fortune's help—but took his guns along

BOOTHILL BLACKSMITH.....*Gladwell Richardson* **43**
When his benefactor was murdered, Swanson went after the killers

A FRIEND OF LAUGHING FOX.....*Donald Bayne Hobart* **65**
Scout Tom Langley sounds the bugle for Frontier peace and justice

KEEPER OF THE BENCHLAND.....*Cliff V. Abrams* **69**
When Old Man River gets war in his whiskers, savvy's sure needed

SWITCHBACK SAVIOR.....*Charles Stoddard* **94**
When Sheriff Jack Harper goes on the trail, he's loaded for bear

BIG MEDICINE.....*Jim Mayo* **97**
Grizzled prospector Billy Dunbar pays a debt to the wily Apaches

A Department

THE HITCHING RAIL.....*Buck Benson* **6**
A meeting-place for range riders—plus announcements and letters

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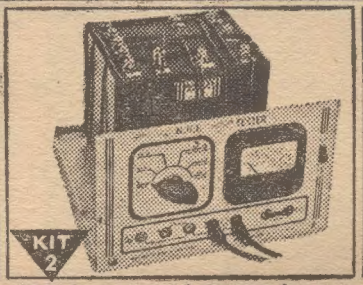

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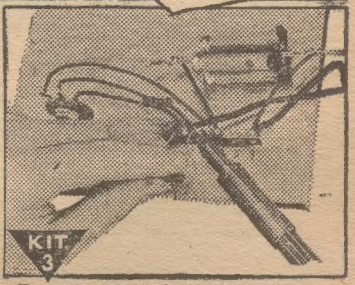

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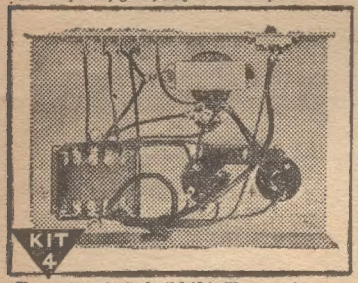

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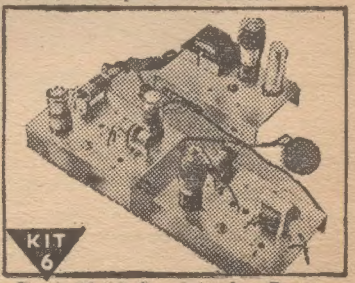

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The HITCHING Rail

***A Department for Readers Conducted by* BUCK BENSON**

NO SUH, THE HILLBILLY east o' the Mississippi and the Mountain Man o' the early West weren't one and the same, pardner, not by a long rifle shot! Got a good letter here from Jack Hill o' the fine city o' Spokane in the beautiful state o' Washington. Jack comments on the practice o' callin' the same things, or classes, by different names, accordin' to what part o' the country they're found. Like in the West, folks call even a few acres o' corn or potatoes a "ranch," while in other parts o' this big country o' ours the same thing would be known as a "farm."

Yo're plumb correct about that practice, ranny, but yo're wrong in thinkin' "Hillbilly" and "Mountain Man" one and the same.

Hunters and Trappers

The Mountain Man o' the western frontier was a distinct type o' individual—a hunter and trapper par excellence, with all rules o' civilized behavior barred, just about. They weren't born and bred in the mountains like the Kentucky mountaineer. The Mountain Men come from practically everywhere —north, south, east, and foreign countries—to hunt and trap in the unknown western part o' the United States.

One by one they come, then banded together in small groups—a sure diversified lot o' men with a love o' adventure and unlimited courage as a common attribute. A Frenchman, a Sandwich Islander, an Englishman, and a man from Virginia might cut tobacco from the same plug.

They went to the mountains in the first place to make money huntin' and trappin' beaver and other animals for their pelts. After a little while they stayed on, most of 'em, out o' sheer likin' for adventure and lawless freedom.

Back to Nature

They sure went back to nature in a big way. Got to where they felt contempt for civilization and all its ways, preferrin' life in the raw, and enjoyin' a freedom that can be found only in the unsettled heart o' nature. What's more, the undisciplined life in the wilds unfitted 'em for ever livin' again in civilized places, or pursuin' the habits o' industry like other men.

Actually, these Mountain Men were the first trail blazers o' the West. They come ahead o' everybody into a land where there wasn't any whites—jest Indians and Mexicans.

Kit Carson

The celebrated Kit Carson, famous trapper-hunter, Indian fighter, and scout to the government o' the United States, was a mountain man for a few years. He took two different squaws for wives durin' those years.

While Kit was a small, unimpressive lookin' hombre physically, he was full o' courage, darin', strength, and ingenuity, and won the admiration and respect o' all.

He didn't remain a Mountain Man, because at heart he was a law-abidin' citizen, even in a land where there wasn't any law. He loved the wilds and the freedom o' the spirit they offered, but he always went back to civilized folks.

These Mountain Men were sure a plumb picturesque, colorful, and romantic part o' our history, though, and don't you forget it.

(Continued on page 8)

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I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and the others.
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The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better. I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.
*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

Finding New Joy

I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.
*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

They didn't represent any profound national movement, but they were a distinct and necessary phase in the growth o' our West. They went into inhospitable wilds, traced streams to their sources, scaled mountains, and made the first trails that, later, thousands o' immigrants were to follow from the Mississippi westward.

Brigham Young selected the valley o' the Great Salt Lake as a future home for his people largely upon information he was able to get from these men o' the mountains.

Lots o' those old Mountain Men are remembered to this day. Young Bill Williams, for instance, was a leader of a band o' trappers. Young Bill was said to be "some" for his height, bein' six-foot-six, and as straight and strong as the barrel of his long rifle.

There was a Mexican whose name was Marcelline. In form he was a Hercules, and had strikin'ly handsome features and masses o' long black hair which hung over the shoulders o' his buckskin huntin' shirt from under his slouched beaver hat. He lived all his life with Mountain Men, and he was said to o' hated Mexicans.

And there was Chabonard, a halfbreed. He was smaller than most, with an iron strength capable o' withstandin' hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and hardships o' every kind. He was said to have wonderful presence o' mind and endless resources in time o' peril—with the instincts of an animal and the moral courage of a man.

There are many others who're still remembered. La Bonte, Fitzpatrick, Hatcher, Killbuck, were a few o' them.

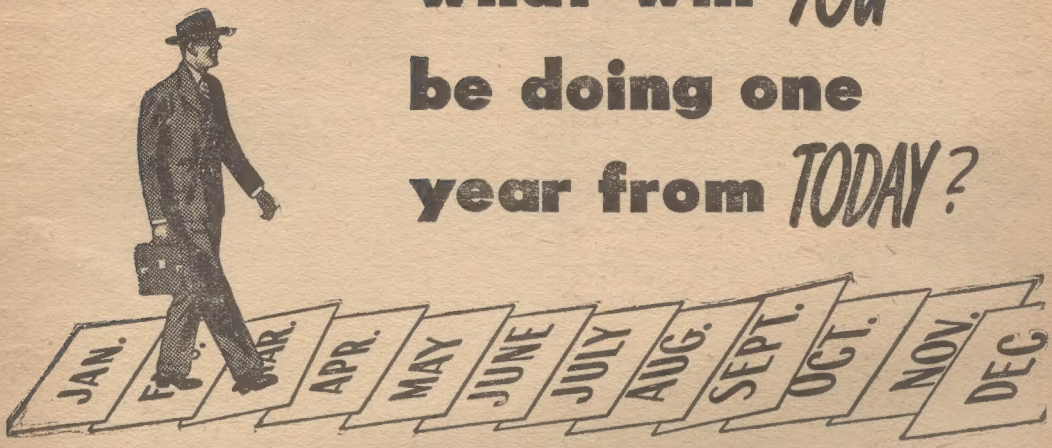
The "Possible" Kit

Mountain Men banded together under a strong leader and went into the wildernesses to hunt and trap for months at a time, seein' no human bein' except their own fellows, maybe a few Indians. They went on horseback, with pack-mules, and each man carried a small kit that he called his "Possible," containin' only the barest necessities o' life.

They would maybe strike the Santa Fe Trail—first trail o' the West, and leadin' from Independence, Missouri to old Santa

(Continued on page 10)

what will YOU be doing one year from TODAY?



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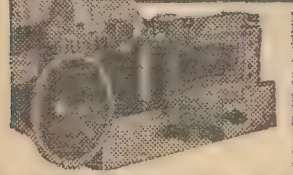

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

Fe—and head along it to the Arkansas River. Then up the river they'd go to the mountains. They would winter in the famous Bayou Salada.

Next spring they'd probably cross the mountains to the country about Salt Lake. They hunted and trapped about the Yellowstone. One o' their favorite haunts was Brown's Hole, an inclosed valley on the Green River o' Wyomin'. In such country they'd hunt and trap, livin' on the land.

They had buffalo meat, and game o' all kinds, but the tail o' the beaver was their favorite food. Months they'd work huntin' and trappin' and curin' their pelts, then they'd go back to civilization and sell their furs.

There were certain "traders" who would follow these men into their camps with goods to exchange for pelts. One o' the most famous o' the lot was Sublette.

In his trader's packs he'd bring tobacco, coffee, and such, and trade his wares at scandalous prices, for furs. The Mountain Men exchanged their pelts, at about a dollar a pound, for whatever they wanted from the trader. Very little money was every exchanged in these remote camps, for the reason that nobody had money.

They Went to Market

But there come a time when, with their great rolls o' pelts, the Mountain Men went to market. It was in the towns they visited that they got their reputation for bein' "White Barbarians." They were called "lazy," by folks not realizin' that the life o' hunters and trappers is mighty durned hard, and real work. In the towns they were on a vacation, a spree, and nobody ever saw them do any work o' any kind.

When they'd come into town they were a roisterin' lot o' hard drinkin' rough-necks, and would proceed to get rid o' their last dollar in furious orgies, treatin' all comers to whiskey, and pledgin' one another to successful hunts and "heaps o' beaver."

When every cent had disappeared from pouches, the free trapper would often make away with rifle, traps, and his horses and mules, to satisfy his "dry."

(Continued on page 107)

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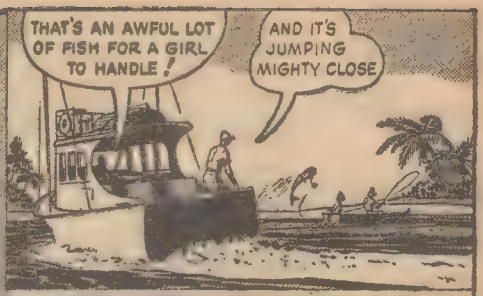
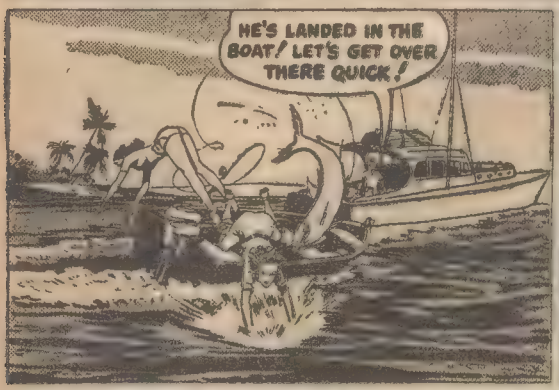
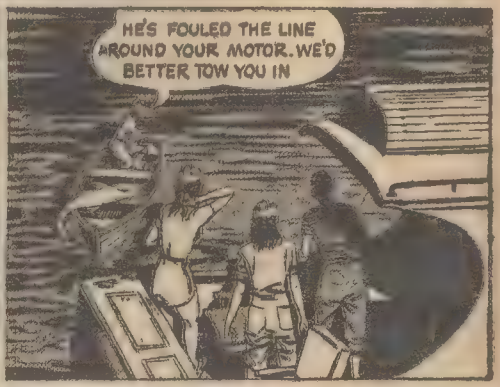
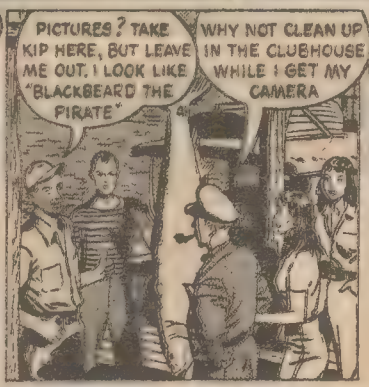
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING

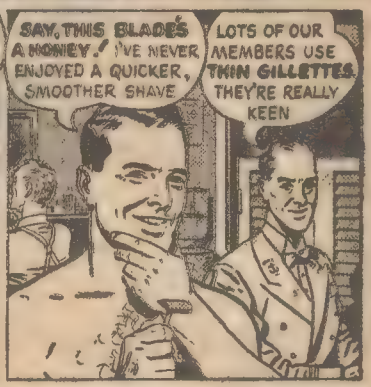


JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN • • •









A Walt Slade Novel

Slade swung his rifle around to cover the approaching horseman

APACHE GOLD

By BRADFORD SCOTT

Gun ghosts ride Skeleton Canyon in a cloud of death and destruction—until the Ranger known as El Halcon shows up to clear the air with a storm of trigger lightning!

CHAPTER I

Home of Bones

"SKELETON CANYON?" The old Mexican shepherd raised his eyes to the lean, bronzed face of the man who sat across the campfire from him.

"Skeleton Canyon," he repeated. "Skeleton Canyon, *Capitan,* was the stronghold of the great Apache war chief, Cocha. He who defied the armed might of *Estados Unidos* for many years. Cocha lies buried in Skeleton Canyon, the exact spot of his grave no man knows. The night he was buried, his followers ran their horses up and down the canyon from dusk to dawn, beating out every possible trace of his grave. And ever after, the dark *Indios* of the mountains shunned Skeleton Canyon as the spiritland of Cocha.

"Every year the *Indios* went into

these mountains to gather *beyotas*—acorns—one of their favorite foods; but in Skeleton Canyon, though the acorns are plentiful and of fine quality, they go unharvested. The *Indios*, that Cocha and those who died with him in the last great fight, ride the canyon on moonlight nights, shaking their phantom weapons at phantom foes. *Si, Capitan,* Skeleton Canyon is haunted."

"Didn't stop folks from opening up mines there," the listener interpolated.

The *pastor* shrugged with Latin eloquence.

"The *gringo,*" he replied sententiously, "fears nothing, especially when on the quest of treasure. Doubtless you will go there, too, *Capitan,* for as all know, *El Halcon* fears nothing living or dead."

Walt Slade, named by the *peons* of the River villages *El Halcon*—The Hawk—smiled, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face, the quirking of the corners of his rather wide mouth somewhat relieving the tinge of fierceness evinced by the prominent hawk nose above and the powerful chin and jaw below. His long gray eyes shone with a merry light that glowed back of their thick black lashes.

"Not so sure about the living," he demurred, "but I never felt there was anything to fear from the dead. Cocha passed on about twenty years back, I understand, so I don't figger there's much to worry about from him."

"Perhaps not," the *pastor* admitted; "but strange things have happened, and are still happening, in Skeleton Canyon, *Capitan.*"

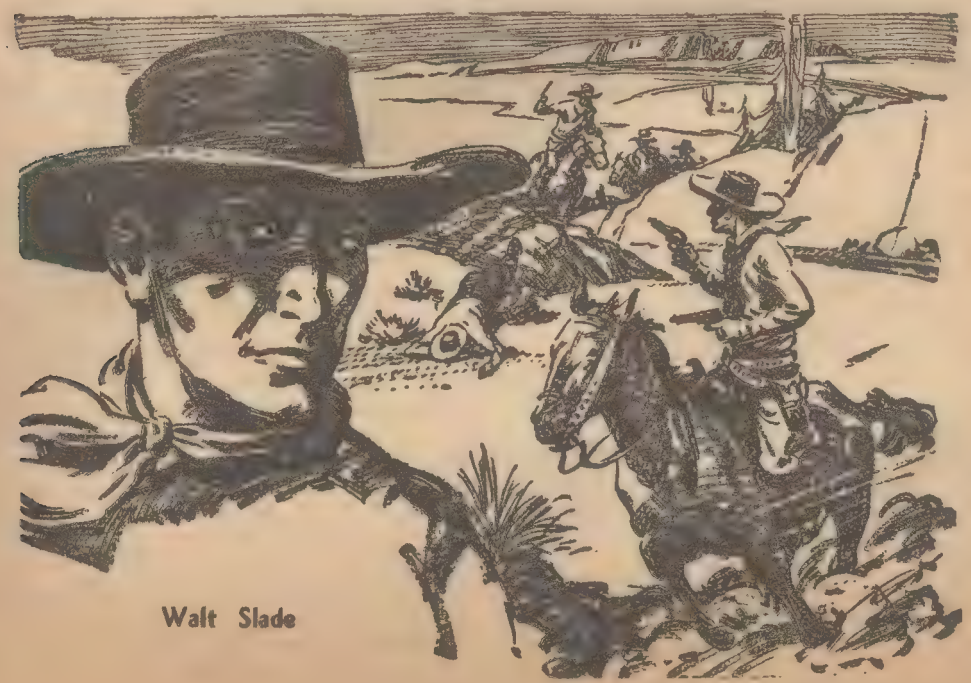
"You're right about that," Slade returned, thoughtfully.

"Smoke signals are still seen in the hills, although the Indios have vanished these many years agone," said the *pastor.* "Signals from fires lighted, no doubt, by the shade of Cocha and wafted into the air as a warning to those who desecrate his spiritland."

"From what I've heard of him, Cocha doesn't need to light any fires," Slade chuckled. "Judging from all accounts, there should be plenty where he's gone."

THE sheepherder permitted himself a smile, but his face quickly grew serious once more.

"Which calls to mind the legend that has grown up around the name of Cocha," he observed. "There are those



Walt Slade

who say that the shade of Cocha still haunts Skeleton Canyon because it has no place else to go. That the gates of Heaven are closed to him, and that because of his so great wickedness, even *El Diablo* will have naught to do with his soul. So the soul of Cocha walks the earth in great loneliness, seeking a home, and finding none."

"Sort of a wandering Apache ghost, eh?" Slade chuckled. "Well, I reckon I'll take a chance on him."

"So you ride to Skeleton Canyon, *Capitan?*"

"Yes, to Pearson, the town they built in the mouth of it after the gold strikes," Slade replied. "I hear it's a heller."

"A wild town, *si,*" the Mexican replied. "The *vaqueros*—cowboys—who work on the ranches nearby go there, and of course there are the miners."

"Uh-huh, a rip-roaring cowboy-mining town," Slade reflected. "Plenty going on all the time, I've a notion. Sort of the center for the whole section."

"Strange men stop there," said the *pastor.* He glanced around and lowered his voice, although the site of his camp was lonely and the chances were there wasn't another soul within twenty miles. "It is said," he added, "that the shade of Cocha appears there at times. A great man, tall, almost, *Capitan,* as yourself."

"Cocha was a big man, then? Apaches are usually short."

"It was said that the mother of Cocha was a white *Senora,* stolen from a village in my country, *Mejico,*" observed the *pastor.* "It was said that Cocha was not dark, like most Apaches, little darker than yourself, I would judge. He spoke both Spanish and English as fluently as he did his native tongue."

"A sort of Apache Quannah Parker, eh?" Slade mused. "Quannah was a Comanche chief, but his mother was white. Mebbe I'll get to meet Cocha in Pearson," he added with a chuckle.

The Mexican crossed himself. "May *El Dios* forbid," he prayed fervently. "To meet him face to face is death."

Slade eyed the other thoughtfully. The old man undoubtedly believed what he said. "Somebody sure getting himself a reputation hereabouts," he mused. "Folks don't usually do that just for the fun of it. Most always they have a good reason for getting other folks worked up and sort of on the run. Raising a ghost is often a good way to do it."

FOR some minutes he smoked in silence, his eyes somber. The old Mexican eyed him obliquely, then spoke.

"*Capitan,*" he said, "I see you carry your *guitarra* with you, as always. Will you not play and sing for old Manuel?"

Slade smiled, the gay, reckless light back in his eyes once more. He picked up the small guitar, shucked off the waterproof case and ran his slim fingers over the strings. Great booming chords rolled forth. He played a masterly prelude that had in it the laughter, the jest, the pathos and the melancholy of the rangeland. Then he threw back his black head and sang a rollicking old cowboy song, his great baritone-bass pealing and thundering under the stars:

Oh, the dust's a-foggin' upward
Where the herd is rollin' past,
And ev'ry blasted critter's
Just exactly like the last!
With the tail riders swearin',
And the point men in the lead,
Ready for to turn 'em
Whenever there is need.

While the trail boss hustles,
Skalleyhootin' out in front
To scout the range for water,
And a place for camp to hunt.
The sun goes slantin' westward
And the flank men beller song
As the wagon comes a-rollin'
And they push the herd along!

For there's biscuits in the oven
And big dumplin's in the pot,
And bacon crisp and sizzlin',
And the coffee's steamin' hot.
Oh, it's dust and sun and sweatin',
One more river for to swim;
Perhaps a sky of lightnin',
And a stampede wild and grim.

But we're laughin' and we're singin'—
There'll be cards and whiskey soon—
For the Palo Pinto shippin' herd
Has crossed the Cimarro-o-on!

The music ended in a crash of chords and a last ringing note. Slade smiled down at the old *pastor*, and slipped the case back onto his guitar.

"Reckon that'll do for a sort of lullaby," he chuckled. "I'm so sleepy about now I'm going to have to take a diamond hitch on my eyelids to hold 'em open, in another minute or two. *Buenas noches*, Manuel."

Ten minutes later both the white-haired old shepherd and the tall, black-haired Texan were rolled up in their blankets and sound asleep.

CHAPTER II

Feud Riders

DAYBREAK found the *pastor* awake. Slade had a hot breakfast with the old man. Then he mounted Shadow, his great black horse, and with his guitar swinging across his shoulders by a silken thong, his heavy black guns sagging in the holsters attached to his double cartridge belts and flaring out from his sinewy hips, he rode westward toward where a towering sunrise-gold-tipped range of mountains fanged into the blue of the Texas sky.

The rolling rangeland was aglow with mellow light. A little breeze shook down showers of dew gems from the grassheads. Birds sang in the thickets. Little streams gleamed like coils of silver.

Slade sang as he rode. Shadow tossed his head and snorted. Both man and horse seemed bursting with lusty life and thoroughly in tune with the beauty of the morning.

For several miles the trail flowed westward across almost level prairie, then gradually it began to climb the shoulders of the foothills that were the beginning of the western mountains. As yet the slopes were long and gentle, with deep, grass-grown and wooded hollows between. Finally, on topping a higher rise, Slade pulled Shadow to a halt and stared across the intervening ridges to where two black and forbidding precipices towered to form the gateway to a canyon that bored into the higher hills.

So tremendous was the height of the cliffs that formed the portals of the gorge that the canyon, though wide, more than a mile from wall to wall, was shadowy.

It gave the impression of tremendous depths beyond.

"That must be where we're headed for," Slade mused, gazing at a drifting smudge that lay dark against the western sky. "Uh-huh, that smoke must be from the Pearson stamp mills, five miles up that hole. Yes, that's Skeleton Canyon, all right, and she looks like what's been said about her. There's a trail turning south from the mouth, for Cooper, the railroad town, I reckon. Looks plenty used, too. Well, let's get going, horse. From what we've heard, we'd ought to do a mite of business in there."

Shadow snorted agreement, and moved down the long opposite sag towards the depths of a wide hollow from which the trail writhed upward for a full two miles to the crest of the opposite ridge.

They reached the bottom of the hollow without mishap and moved across its brush grown floor. From time to time Slade glanced upward toward the ridge crest knifing the skyline. Suddenly his gray eyes narrowed.

As if jerked into view by invisible strings, a horseman had appeared over the knife-edge of the ridge. For an instant he loomed against the sky, then hurtled downward, driving his mount at breakneck speed.

"Say, that jigger sure is in a hurry," Slade muttered. "Look at him fog it! He—now what in blazes?"

Over the crest of the ridge, four more riders had bulged into view, three hundred yards, perhaps, behind the first, who was urging his horse downward with voice and hand. Slade could faintly hear wild whoops as the pursuers skalleyhooted down the sag. Then from the ranks of the hard riding four, the hard, metallic crack of a gun reached The Hawk. He saw the lone horseman duck, bend low over his saddle, and cast a glance backward. Again the sound of a report reached Slade. A whole volley

Hudson's fingers coiled like
talons of steel across
Slade's throat

of shots followed, the smoke rolling backward from the firing horsemen in a thin, whitish cloud. But still the man in front, mounted on a shaggy bay, sped onward.

"Don't know what this is all about," Slade told Shadow, "but four against one sure doesn't look sporting. May be a sheriff's posse, but I don't think so. Anyhow, we'll take a chance."

He swiftly backed Shadow into the edge of the growth, where he would be all but invisible, slid his long Winchester from where it snuggled in the saddle boot beneath his left thigh, and dismounted. He pressed the butt firmly against his shoulder and cuddled his cheek against the stock. His gray eyes glanced through the sights.

SMOKE spurted from the Winchester's muzzle. The report beat back from the wall of growth. Slade saw the pursuers duck in their saddles, heard their triumphant whoops change to yells of surprise and alarm. He chuckled as he shifted the rifle muzzle the merest trifle.

"Reckon that one came plenty close to give them a scare," he told himself. "Now to fan one past right in front of them."

The rifle rang loudly again. This time the four horsemen jerked their cayuses to a sliding halt. A third bullet caused them to duck wildly. Slade could hear their bellowed curses as they whirled their horses and fled madly back up the slope.

He sent two more slugs whining above their heads to speed them on their way, and lowered the smoking rifle. Then without the least preliminary warning, he hurled himself sideways and down. From the growth to his left had sounded a sharp snap, as of a dry stick trodden on by an incautious foot.

Even as Slade hit the ground, a gun roared from the growth. The bullet fanned his face. Amid the brush a man loomed dark and gigantic.

Slade fired from the hip. The man reeled back with a yell of pain, pawing at his blood streaming hand. His gun, the lock smashed and broken by the heavy slug, thudded to the ground. Slade came to his feet in a lithe ripple of motion, his rifle muzzle lined with the other's breast. His eyes were cold as frosted steel, his face set in granite lines.

The gunman glared at him. Then his eyes bulged, his mouth sagged open. He did not seem to see the rifle barrel trained on his middle. He took a step forward, halted at the sharp click of the cocked hammer, still staring.

"Hell and blazes!" he swore in a thick voice. "I thought you were a Harlow!"

"That so?" *El Halcon* returned. "Open season on Harlows hereabouts, even to shooting them in the back?"

"They'd shoot me in the back quick enough, if they got the chance," the other replied sullenly. He lifted his head at the drum of approaching hoofs, his glance shot along the trail. He let out a yelp of recognition.

"That's my brother Arnold foggin' the track!" he exclaimed. "Hey, Arn, this way!" he shouted.

Slade took a step backward and a little to one side, swinging his rifle barrel around to cover the approaching horseman, who held a gun in his hand. The rider pulled his mount to a slithering stop a few yards distant. He stared open-mouthed at the tableau presented at the edge of the growth.

"Light off, Arn," the man in the brush called. "I made a mistake."

The newcomer, who was little more than a boy in years, had a frank freckled face that suddenly split in a grin.

"Looks sort of like yuh did," he remarked dryly, his glance on his brother's blood dripping fingers.

"Uh-huh," said the other. "I heard this gent throwin' lead up the trail and I knowed you were headed this way. Nacherly I took him for a Harlow. He ain't."

The boy, who had holstered his gun and slipped to the ground, stared at Slade.

"Why," he exclaimed, "you must be the feller who saved me from them blankety-blank Harlows. The Harlows were chasin' me, Sime," he explained to his brother. "They were gainin' on me every jump and I thought it was curtains for me. Then all of a sudden a gun cracked down here and I heard a bullet screech over my head.

"I figgered then I was s'rounded and a goner for sure; but the slug went on and smoked the Harlows. Others came after it and fanned them proper. They turned around and high-tailed back up the sag. If it hadn't been for this feller, Sime, they would have done for me."

His brother wet his lips with his tongue. "G-good gosh!" he breathed. "And I came nigh onto pluggin' him!"

He turned to Slade, who had lowered his rifle.

"Feller," he said, "there ain't no use for me tryin' to tell you how sorry I am. Just put yourself in my place, and mebbe you'll understand. I'm Sime Bowman, and this is my brother Arnold. We're in a feudin' with the Harlows and they're out to get us."

SLADE nodded. "Looked sort of like they were out to get somebody," he admitted. "Just what is it all about?"

"Well," Sime Bowman replied, "folks hereabouts call us fellers sheepmen. I reckon that don't stand over-well with you, seein' as you got the look of a cowman."

"I have no objection to sheep, so long as they're handled right, and sheepmen have a right to live same as anybody else," Slade replied quietly as he slipped fresh cartridges into the magazine of his rifle. "Why are the Harlows on the prod against you? Do you let your sheep destroy range?"

"Hell, we don't own no sheep," Sime Bowman returned. "We raise goats—Angora goats—but some folks hereabouts figger goats and sheep are all the same, and won't listen to reason. Goats don't hurt range."

"That's right," Slade nodded, "goats don't."

"But you can't make some folks believe it," replied Bowman. "The Harlows jumped us soon as we landed in this section. Us fellers are newcomers here, yuh know, been here less than a year, and the Harlows are old-timers—been here all their lives, I reckon. A mite back I had a rukus with Wes Harlow in a Pearson saloon; flung him head first into a spittoon. He didn't take over kind to bein' manhandled—reckon it never happened to him before—and swore he'd get me first chance he got. Right after that somebody tried to drygulch his brother Tom. The Harlows said us fellers did it, and the row was on proper."

"I see," Slade commented thoughtfully. He strode to where Shadow stood, slipped the rifle back into the boot and from his saddlebags took a roll of bandage and a box of antiseptic ointment.

"Let me have a look at that hand," he told Bowman. "Nothing serious, just a chunk of meat knocked loose," he pronounced after a brief examination. He quickly and skillfully dressed and bandaged the wound.

"Shouldn't give you any trouble now," he said. Stepping back he looked the Bowman brothers over.

Sime Bowman was a huge man, tall, almost as *El Halcon* himself, with wide, thick shoulders and a barrel chest. His eyes were dark and piercing, his hair almost black, his complexion verging on swarthiness. His brother Arnold, in contrast, was slender and slightly built, with a fair skin and merry blue eyes. He returned The Hawk's gaze with interest.

"Golly, but yuh're a tall feller!" he exclaimed! "Sime is six-feet-two, and you must be a couple of inches taller, anyhow. Sime, I betcha he could lick you."

"Well, he ain't goin' to get a chance to try it, not if I have anythin' to say about it," the older Bowman returned gruffly. "A sample of his shootin' is enough of him to suit me."

"Reckon I was lucky," Slade smilingly deprecated the feat.

"Uh-huh," Sime replied dryly, "I've noticed that sort of luck before. It generally holds."

"Reckon I'm on the right track to reach Pearson?" Slade changed the subject.

"That's right," Arnold Bowman said. "I was headed for there myself, when I run into the Harlows. They were cuttin' into the main trail from their spread to the north. I decided to come back this way."

"Our holdin's are to the south of the trail," Sime Bowman explained. "Our *casa* is a couple of miles to the southeast of here. I was makin' for the trail myself, aimin' to head for Pearson,

when I heard the shootin'."

"Well, seeing as we're all three headed in the same direction, suppose we get going?" Slade suggested.

"Could do worse, I reckon," Bowman agreed. "I'll get my horse—got him back in the brush."

A FEW minutes later they were riding up the slope to the crest of the ridge.

"Hope the Harlows ain't holed up somewhere waitin' for us," Arn remarked.

"Not much chance," Sime replied. "They'll know we're on the lookout for them, and there isn't any place much they could hide. The canyon is open and very little brush. Besides, there's most always somebody ridin' in or out. They'd be takin' too much of a chance."

They topped the ridge and the trail wound steeply downward to the level range. A mile beyond was the dark mouth of the canyon.

As they drew near the gorge, Slade eyed the towering portals with interest. He noted that on the right, several hundred yards up the face of the cliff, was a broad bench thickly grown with chaparral. This bench flowed north until it vanished around a curve of the cliff. Below it the cliff was sheer. Where it veered around, the perpendicular wall was a full three miles distant.

At a brisk trot they approached the canyon mouth. Arn Bowman, evidently a merry soul, chatted and laughed. Sime, on the contrary, replied in grunts and monosyllables. Slade was mostly silent, listening to the talk of the brothers, which dealt largely with range conditions in the section. They were within perhaps three hundred yards of the base of the cliff when Sime Bowman turned in his saddle to glance back the way they had come. Even as he did so, he threw up his hands and reeled sideways from the hull. From the bench that broke the face of the cliff came the crack of a rifle.

In a ripple of movement, Slade was off Shadow, his Winchester in his hands. He flung the rifle to his shoulder and raked the face of the bench and its bristle of dark growth with a stream of lead. The ejection lever of the Winchester was a blur of movement, and had a cartridge jammed the lever would have splintered like matchwood. Crouching behind his horse, he paused, eyeing the bench for trace of movement.

Arn Bowman had leaped from his saddle and was kneeling beside his stricken brother. Slade showered fresh cartridges into the magazine of his rifle, his eyes never leaving the ragged line of growth clinging to the cliff face.

Nothing moved there. No more shots sounded. Slade's glance traveled along the bench to the mistily distant bulge that hid its continuance from view. Finally he lowered his rifle and stepped boldly into view. Still nothing happened.

For a moment he studied the bench, then he turned to the wounded Bowman. "Either plugged him or he high-tailed," he remarked, of the unseen dry-gulcher.

Arn was kneeling beside his brother, tears running down his face.

"I—I reckon he's done for," he gulped, pointing to a ragged tear in the back of Sime's shirt.

Slade said nothing, but proceeded to shuck off Bowman's shirt to reveal his sinewy back and shoulders. Across the spine, just above the waist line, was a slight furrow that oozed a few drops of blood. Slade probed the wound with sensitive fingers; his face brightened with relief.

"Don't figger he's bad hurt," he told Arn. "The slug grazed his backbone—hit him a hard lick. Sort of paralyzed him and knocked him out. I think he'll come out of it in a minute. See—his hands are moving already."

A few minutes later, Bowman opened his eyes and stared dazedly about. With Slade's assistance he sat up, pale and shaky, but apparently otherwise little the worse for his experience. He burst into a torrent of profanity, directed against the Harlows. Slade said nothing, but studied the lofty bench with speculative eyes.

"How far around the bulge does that ledge slope down to the level ground?" he asked suddenly.

"About a mile," Arn replied.

Slade nodded, his eyes thoughtful. He assisted Sime to get on his feet.

"How you feel?" he asked.

"Not so peart," Bowman returned, "but I've a notion I'll be okay in a little while. Feel sort of numb all over, but the feelin's passin'. Another inch and I reckon I'd be a goner. Would have busted my backbone all to pieces."

"It was close, all right," Slade agreed. "Reckon turning in your saddle like you did saved you. Must have spoiled his aim just as he pulled trigger."

He began reloading his Winchester.

"Will have to buy shells first thing when I get to town, at the rate I'm going," he growled. "Almost emptied my belt. This is a hard section on ammunition."

"I hope yuh didn't waste all them ca'tridges," Sime Bowman spat vindictively. "I hope yuh shot that sidewinder in the middle and left him to die sweatin' up there in the brush. You didn't get a look at him?"

SLADE shook his head. "Either got him dead center or he slid into the clear right after he cracked down on us," he replied. "Not a twig rustled up there. The hellion must have moved like an Indian. Well, if you're able to fork your bronk, we might as well make another try for town. I've a notion a drink would sit pretty well with you about now."

"It would," Sime grunted reply, "several of 'em. If I keep on losin' meat at the rate I've started out today, I'll soon be able to jine a circus as a livin' skeleton. Does my back feel sore!"

They mounted and rode on, warily eyeing the bench. Nothing more happened, however, and a few minutes later they were between the towering walls of the gorge.

As they entered, Slade noted that the trail within the canyon mouth was broader, deeply rutted and showing other signs of much travel. A branch also much used, turned sharply south, skirting the cliffs. A less clearly defined track flowed into the north.

"That's the way to the Harlow ranchhouse," Sime Bowman observed, gesturing with his thumb to the northern branch. "The other one heads for Cooper and the railroad. Supplies for the town and the mines come by way of it, and

El Halcon whistled under his breath as he stared at the deadly-looking arrow

the gold wagons use it to pack the metal to Cooper."

A few minutes later they met a huge rumbling wagon pacing down the canyon.

"Hi-yuh, Bowman?" the bewhiskered driver shouted. "Met three of the Harlow boys about an hour back, foggin' it for town. They 'peared to be in a mite of a hurry, and they was cussin' like blazes as they went past."

"They'll be in more of a hurry if I line sights with them!" Bowman replied vindictively.

Slade turned his level gray gaze on the big man's face.

"Easy on the war talk, it doesn't get you anywhere," he advised quietly. "Besides, you haven't any proof it was the Harlows who dry-gulched you."

"You heard that teamster say he met three of 'em, didn't yuh?" countered Bowman. "Arn says there were four chased him down the sag. That means one didn't ride for town. I'll bet my last peso the fourth sidewinder was holed up on that bench waitin' for us."

"And I'll bet he wasn't," Slade replied.

Bowman stared at him.

"What makes you so blasted sure?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you, when the right time comes," Slade replied. "Meanwhile, you can take my word for it that it wasn't one of the four Harlows who threw lead at your brother."

Sime Bowman frowned at *El Halcon*, his bushy brows drawing together over his sultry eyes. Then he shrugged his thick shoulders and threw out his hands in an expressive gesture.

"All right, all right," he growled. "I reckon yuh know what you're talkin' about and have reasons for sayin' it, but it's past me to figger out."

NEXT MONTH

RIDERS OF THE YUCCA TRAIL

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AND OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER III

Hell Town

AS THEY progressed up the canyon, a deep, monotonous hum became apparent, vibrating through the air, echoing back from the cliffs. It increased to a sonorous pounding and rumbling. Slade knew it to be the ponderous steel pestles of the stamps doing their steady dance on the gold ore.

"Big ones," he mused, apropos of the stamps. "Must be good paying deposits in this section."

After another half-hour of riding they rounded a turn and the town lay before them, a huddle of ramshackle buildings dominated by the gaunt structures that housed the stamps. The walls of the shacks were raw with the color of freshly-sawn, unpainted boards. There were even a dotting of tents that accommodated newcomers unable to find more comfortable dwellings. It seemed that every other building housed a saloon or gambling hall.

"A roarer, all right," Slade told himself. "Growing so fast it can't hold itself."

They passed through the straggling outskirts of the town and reached the main street. Long hitch-racks lined the outer edges of the board sidewalks. The street was rutted and deep with dust. A number of horses were tethered at the racks. Slade saw that the rigs were usually equipped with saddle boots, from which thrust the stocks of rifles. Gents evidently made a practice of going heeled in this section.

They drew near a rambling false-front that boasted plate glass windows across which was lettered in gold: "Alhambra Saloon." In front of the swinging doors stood a lanky old man with a big nickel badge pinned to his vest. He had a drooping mustache, cold blue eyes, hound-dog chops, and a sawed-off shotgun cradled in his arm. As they came abreast of him, he gestured up the street with the shotgun.

"Keep goin'," he directed in a harsh voice. "The Harlows are in here, and I

don't aim to have any gunnin'."

Sime growled surlily under his breath, but did not choose to argue.

"That's Sheriff Jess Cross," he told Slade, as they rode on. "He's just moved up here from Cooper, the county seat. He's a cold proposition."

"Looks it," Slade agreed.

"Uh-huh, and he's plumb ready to use that scattergun," Sime grunted. "A square shooter, or I'm a heap mistook, but don't stand for no foolishness. I reckon the Harlows have got orders to stay indoors till we're out of sight. Well, here's the Queen High, Ace Hudson's place. We might as well light off here."

They tied their horses at a rack and entered the saloon. Sime Bowman bellowed a greeting to a man standing at the end of the long bar.

"Come a-runnin', Ace!" he shouted. "Want yuh to know Walt Slade, a prime feller. Slade, shake hands with Ace Hudson. He owns these diggin's and he's top-hole."

Hudson was a tall man, broad of shoulder, lean of waist. He had a dark, regularly featured and extremely handsome face, lank black hair and inscrutable black eyes. He approached with lithe grace and shook hands with a firm grip, his thin lips twitching slightly in a smile.

"Anybody Sime speaks well of is okay with me," he said. "Have a drink on the house."

"Ace is about the best friend I've got in the section," Bowman remarked to Slade when the saloonkeeper had move away to attend to his many duties. "He's a smart feller—got book learnin', and he sure runs this place right. Games are square, drinks are what yuh order, and he don't stand for no foolishness with his dance floor girls. Plenty salty when he needs to be, too. Everybody respects him."

Slade nodded. The Queen High owner had that sort of look about him.

IT SOON became apparent to Slade that the Bowmans were popular. Several men in cowboy dress greeted them cordially, as did others in the unmistakable garb of miners.

"Not all these fellers are bullheaded like the Harlows," Bowman explained. "Some of 'em rec'nize the difference between sheep and goats and act accordin'; but you can't tell the Harlows and their clan anythin'. They're sot in their ways, and when they get a notion in their thick heads, it stays there. Reckon they've sort of been used to runnin' things in the section. I figger they don't even take over kind to the minin' here in the canyon. The mines brought lots of new folks who don't figger the Harlows are so over much."

Slade nodded. He had encountered similar situations before and understood perfectly how old-timers, cattle barons of the range, accustomed to lording it over their fellows and being looked up to, would resent the arrival of newcomers in the section, and act accordingly. Men who follow mining strikes are a hardy lot, naturally independent, and impatient of customs and traditions that tend to slow the wheels of progress.

The big ranch owners of cattleland, comfortable on their vast domains and content with the existing order of things, did not take kindly to having that order disrupted. In this section, doubtless, the Harlows had for many years been a law unto themselves, and bitterly resented any change that would tend to dispute their rule.

"And the result very often means fireworks," Slade told himself.

Sime Bowman grew steadily more convivial as repeated snorts of red-eye warmed him. Slade drank sparingly. Finally he set his empty glass on the bar.

"I aim to look up a place to stable my horse," he told Bowman. "See you later."

"There's a good place just around the next corner," the goat rancher told him. "You can get a room over the stalls, too, if you aim to sleep in town. Me and Arn would be mighty pleased to have yuh ride back to our *casa* with us and spend the night, if you'd be so minded."

"Figger to stay in town tonight," Slade replied. "Had enough riding for one day. Later I may take you up on it."

He left the saloon and retrieved Shadow. Dusk was sifting down from the towering walls of the canyon. The sun had vanished behind their mighty cliffs,

and on their crests played strange and glorious fires that reflected down from the blazing sunset sky above. The dark eyes of windows had changed to squares and rectangles of gold and the mining town was starting to hum with quickening life.

Slade found the stable with no difficulty and arranged for Shadow's care and a sleeping room for himself, in which he deposited his guitar and riding gear. Then he strolled back to the main street, now inadequately lighted by lanterns hung on poles and by the bars of radiance streaming through the windows and over the swinging doors of the saloons. He did not pause at the Queen High, however, but continued on down the street until he turned in at the Alhambra. Sheriff Cross and his shotgun were no longer in evidence.

As Slade entered the saloon, a sudden hush fell over the big room. His eyes narrowed slightly, but he walked unconcernedly to the bar and ordered a drink. From the corner of his eyes he noted a big bulky man, with a lined face, cold blue eyes and tawny hair sprinkled with gray, disengage himself from a nearby group.

The big man moved forward ponderously until he was within a yard or two of Slade. He paused and looked The Hawk up and down.

"My name's Wes Harlow," he announced without preamble.

Slade returned the other's gaze.

"Glad to know you, Harlow," he acknowledged.

Wes Harlow snorted, his eyes hard on Slade's middle.

"Saw yuh ride in with the Bowmans," he announced.

"Good eyes," Slade commented matter-of-factly.

Harlow jerked his gaze upward, then again dropped it to Slade's cartridge belts.

"Two-gun man, eh?" he remarked. "Reckon the Bowmans brought you in to do their fightin' for them."

Slade smiled slightly, but neither affirmed nor contradicted the statement. Harlow eyed him truculently.

"Just want to tell yuh," he growled, "that it'll be a hefty chore to pack, even for—*El Halcon!*"

THERE was a stir at the bar as Harlow pronounced the last two words. Men turned from their drinks to stare. Dealers looked up from their cards. Poker players seemed to forget the hands they held. Even the bartenders paused with bottles in their hands to regard, with awe, the almost legendary figure whose exploits were the talk of Texas and the Southwest. *El Halcon!* Who, "if he isn't an owlhoot, misses bein' one by the skin of his teeth!"

Slade's gaze did not waver. He smiled down at Harlow from his great height.

"You figger the Bowmans need somebody to do their fighting for them?" he inquired mildly. "Seems to me, from what I've heard, you ought to be in a position to know better."

Wes Harlow stared, seemingly taken aback by Slade's smiling good humor. Doubtless he had expected denial or blustering truculence. He was apparently at a loss how to answer.

"If the Bowmans didn't bring you in, what are you doin' in this section?" he burst out.

"Where's the jury?" Slade inquired.

"Wh-what?" Harlow stuttered, more bewildered than ever.

"You see," Slade explained, "the last time I had a lot of questions put to me, there was a jury sitting alongside."

Somebody laughed. Wes Harlow flushed darkly. Mechanically, his hand dropped toward the butt of the heavy gun swinging low on his hip. Slade did not move. He continued to regard Harlow with smiling eyes. Harlow fumbled his fingers together uncertainly, then raised his hand and rasped his stubby chin.

"Oh, heck!" he exploded at last. "I reckon swappin' words with you is about the same as what I've heard tell swappin' lead with yuh is like; but what I said stands. You'll be packin' a hefty chore if yuh take up with the Bowmans."

He turned and strode back to his companions, two of whom, Slade judged from their resemblance to him, were his brothers.

Slade finished his drink in leisurely fashion and left the saloon, conscious that the eyes of the Harlows followed him through the swinging doors. He

made his way back to the Queen High, where he found the Bowmans still at the bar.

"I aim to have some chuck," he told Sime. "Care to sit with me?"

"A good notion," Bowman agreed. "Feel the need of somethin' to hold this snake juice down."

While they waited for the food to arrive, Sime Bowman glanced around him with evident satisfaction.

"I like this section," he confided. "Some nice folks hereabouts. Glad I landed here, even though we have had trouble."

"How come you to coil your twine here in the first place?" Slade asked curiously.

Bowman chuckled. "I always been curious about the section, since my dad used to talk about it," he replied. "You see, my dad commanded the cavalry detachment that did for Cocha, the Apache, and his hellions. He used to tell me about the big fight here that finished Cocha. Like to hear about it?"

SLADE nodded, and Bowman began. As the tale progressed, Slade realized that Sime knew the art of telling a story well. The grim drama of years gone by seemed to unfold before his eyes as if the actors in it were present:

In the depths of Skeleton Canyon, where the towering walls were replaced by long slopes thickly covered with tall chaparral growth, the war chief, Cocha, and his Mangas Apaches made merry. Their last raid, on a wagon train, had been highly successful. Among other things valued by the Indians, the train had provided some kegs of whiskey.

Secure in their stronghold, the Apaches were consuming great quantities of food and washing it down with the white man's firewater. Cocha, tall, erect, his white blood showing in his lighter coloring and lither figure, stood near the central fire. Nearby sat his Spanish wife, the mother of his son, old before her time, staring somberly into the fire.

The braves danced about the fires, sang and shouted.

Abruptly, however, Cocha raised his head in an attitude of listening. From around the bend down canyon welled a rhythmic clicking. Even as Cocha shouted an order, the brassy, ringing note of a bugle blared forth, sounding the charge.

The Indians raced to their ponies, tethered nearby, and mounted in hot haste, gripping their weapons.

Around the bend stormed a blue-clad cavalry troop in the wake of the screaming bugle. Rifles cracked, braves spun from their horses. Others fired wildly or fled up the slopes to the shelter of the thick growth.

Cocha, utterly fearless, imbued with bitter hatred of the whites, rode forward. He flung his rifle to his shoulder, lined sights with the broad breast of the Captain riding in front. The rifle cracked, the Captain reeled in his saddle, steadied himself and thundered forward. Cocha fired again. Then the heavy cavalry saber flashed up and down. Cocha pitched from his pony's back, his skull cloven, to lie in a bloody heap on the ground.

The troop stormed through the camp,

[*Turn page*]

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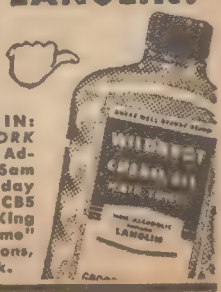


AND TUNE IN: TWO NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sunday evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.

shooting and slashing. The Spanish wife slumped forward onto her face; a chance bullet had caught her squarely between her staring eyes.

The ground was dotted with slain Apaches; but now smoke began spurting from the growth on the slopes. Saddles were emptied. The Captain shouted an order. The blue-clad cavalrymen dismounted and sought shelter.

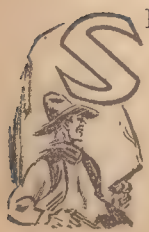
All the long, hot day, crouched behind boulders, tree trunks and clumps of brush, the soldiers fought a bitter battle with the maddened braves, who, despite their losses, still outnumbered them two to one. Charge after charge the soldiers withstood. Attack after attack was beaten off. But at heavy cost. When darkness fell, the Captain, badly wounded, with half his men dead, ordered a retreat. Slowly the troop withdrew down the canyon. The Indians had fought them to a standstill, but just the same they had won. Cocha was dead, his power broken forever.

When the last hoof had clicked out of hearing down the canyon, the surviving Apaches crept from cover and raised their fallen Chief. With the moon hanging red over the cliffs and the canyon brimmed with lurid light and purple shadows, they buried him. Over the nameless grave, his son, tall, handsome, lighter even in coloring than the great War Chief himself, little more than a boy in years, swore an oath of vengeance.

All night long the canyon's walls echoed back the hoof beats of racing ponies, and when the quiet dawn stole over the mountains, no man could say where lay the grave of Cocha.

CHAPTER IV

Silent Death



SIME BOWMAN concluded his yarn. "And that was the end of Cocha and his tribe, so far as Texas was concerned," he said. "Dad said what was left of the bunch made their way west to Arizona before they stopped moving. The other Injuns in the mountains stayed away from Skeleton Canyon ever after that."

He glanced about, lowered his voice. "Durin' the past year, there's folks hereabouts who swear they've seen Cocha ridin' with his braves," he added. "Darn nonsense, of course—he's been dead twenty years—but lots of folks believe it. He was seen the night the Harlows lost a big herd from their southwest pasture. Then again the night before the gold wagons were robbed and two guards killed. And the evenin' the stage was held up and a valuable express shipment lifted.

"The driver of the stage, who got well after he was shot, swore it was Cocha dressed up in his war bonnet and everythin'—said he rec'lected Cocha from the old days and plumb recognized him. Ain't that the dadblamedest foolishness yuh ever heard tell of?"

As Slade was about to reply, a shadow fell across the table. Ace Hudson, the saloon owner, placed two brimming glasses on the board.

"Somethin' special, out of my private bottle," he remarked pleasantly. "Here's luck to you and your friend, Sime."

Slade and Bowman lifted their glasses in acknowledgement. Hudson drank with them and, with a cordial smile that showed a flash of white teeth in his dark face, walked back to the bar.

"Ace sure is a fine feller," remarked Bowman, wiping his lips. "He never overlooks anythin'. That's how he built up his business, I reckon. Once a new feller drops in here, he comes back."

"Good business," Slade agreed.

"Reckon it's just nacherel for Ace to be that way, too," Bowman added.

Slade suddenly lifted his head in an attitude of listening.

"What yuh hear?" his companion asked.

Slade chuckled. "It's what I don't hear all of a sudden," he explained. "The hum of the stamps. They've stopped."

"Gettin' ready for the cleanup," Bowman said. "They allus clean up just before payday."

"When's payday?" Slade asked.

Bowman considered a moment. "Let's see," he replied, "this is Wednesday. Payday will be Saturday, if they get the dinero in on time. Reckon the stage

will bring it from Cooper tomorrow."

Slade nodded thoughtfully, the concentration furrow between his black brows deepening slightly.

"She'll be a big one, too," Bowman went on. "Bonuses this time, I heard. Reckon the old pueblo will howl Saturday night. She'll be wuth seein', all right. Well, reckon I might as well drag Arn away from that redeye and head back for the *casa*. Got work to do tomorrow. Sure yuh won't ride with us?"

"Not tonight," Slade declined. "But I hope to get out your way if I decide to stick around the section for a spell. I'd like to see your goats."

"Cute little critters," Bowman replied. "It's a payin' business, too. And this section is prime goat range. Know anythin' about Angora goats?"

"Get mohair from them, and Morocco leather, don't you?" Slade replied.

"Uh-huh, and the wool is used with other fibres for linings, upholstery fabrics, velours and artificial furs. The wool doesn't shrink in milling. Gloves are made from the hides, too. Angora goats are mighty valuable. I got the notion of raisin' 'em over in the southeast, where I saw a big goat ranch and learned considerable about the business. Easier to handle than cows.

"If some folks didn't have such dadblamed loco notions about 'em! Horses don't take over kind to 'em, though. Can't seem to stand the smell, and don't like to get mixed up with 'em. Get used to 'em after a while, though. Well, I'm goin' to trail my rope. See yuh soon. My hand? Oh, I'd just about forgot about it. Back's a mite sore, but I reckon I'll pull through. *Adios!*"

After the Bowmans departed, Slade smoked a final cigarette and also took his leave, receiving a friendly nod from Ace Hudson as he turned to go. He walked leisurely along the street and turned in at the alley that led to the stable.

The alley was dark, and a big tree that shaded the stable and grazed its branches against the front wall added to the gloom with its wide-spreading shadow. Slade passed beneath its arching limbs to reach the stable door. He was just turning the knob when his boot crunched on something that rolled under his foot and caused him to stagger. With a muttered expletive, he stooped and picked up the offending object. It was a broken bough from the tree, the leaves still green and crisp.

SLADE turned the branch over in his fingers. Struck by a sudden thought, he stepped out of the shadow and held the splintered end to a beam of light that filtered down from a street lantern on the corner. The break was clean and new. Holding the bough in his hand, he glanced up at the tree spreading above his head. Directly above the door was a dark opening which he identified as the raised window of his own room. Somehow or other, the yawning aperture had an ominous look, like the gaping mouth of a beast of prey. Men who ride with danger as their constant stirrup companion learn not to disregard little things, otherwise they do not live to ride long. He dropped his glance to the broken branch in his hand.

"Now how in blazes did this thing come to be down here?" he muttered. "There's not a breath of wind stirring and hasn't been all evening."

He studied the arching branches, but could make out nothing in the gloom. Finally he tossed the branch aside, let himself in and closed and locked the door behind him. Then he noiselessly ascended the stairs.

The narrow passage at the head of the stairs was dimly lighted by a single bracket lamp turned low. Slade paused before the closed door of his room, listening intently. He could not hear the slightest sound. Finally, standing well to one side and hugging the wall, he gripped the knob and turned it slowly and carefully until the bolt was free. Then, with a quick jerk, he threw the door wide open.

Something hissed through the air, fanning his face with the breath of its passing, and thudded against the far wall. Inside the room sounded a sharp clatter.

Slade leaped back, hands streaking to his guns. With both muzzles trained on the door opening he crouched against the wall, tense and ready. But the inside of the room was utterly silent. After that single quick clatter no sound broke

the stillness.

Slade's glance flickered to the object quivering in the far wall of the passage and directly opposite the door opening. It was a long arrow, steel tipped, gaudily feathered. The steel head was driven deep into the tough wall boards.

El Halcon whistled under his breath as he stared at the deadly looking arrow.

"Would have gone through me like a spike through a pat of butter, if I'd been in line with it!" he muttered. "Now what in blazes!"

He hesitated a moment longer, then, holstering one gun, stepped to the lamp and removed it from its bracket. Holding it high, he peered cautiously into the room. It was empty of life. His gaze centered on a heavy string secured to the inner knob of the door and stretching across the room to the window.

He followed it with his eyes, saw that it was tied to a stout upright securely lashed to a strong tree branch paralleling the wall of the building and a couple of feet beyond the window ledge. A broad and shallow furrow was cut into the side of the upright fronting the window. Its top was notched.

Slade crossed the room, still holding the lamp. He noticed something lying on the floor beneath the window ledge. He stooped and picked it up. It was a long and heavy bow, stoutly strung.

Setting the lamp on a nearby table, he stood and stared at the simple but devilish contrivance, understanding flooding his mind. He laid the bow against the window opening, saw that the ends of the stave extended beyond the opening on either side.

"Set the ends against the window jamb on either side, drew the string back and slipped it into that shallow notch on top of the upright," he muttered. "Laid the arrow across the drawn bow, with the tip of it resting in the furrow and the string against it. Fastened one end of the cord to the upright, the other end to the door knob.

"The door opened out, and when it was opened, the pull of the cord fastened to the knob would bend the upright, loosening the bow string and shooting the arrow. And anybody standing in the door would get the arrow through his body. Of all the snake-blooded tricks! Looks like somebody in this section sort of doesn't like me!

"And if the jigger who climbed the tree and rigged up that contrivance hadn't busted off a branch and forgot to carry it away with him, it would have worked!" he added grimly. "A mighty lucky slip, for me, on his part. But that's the way with the owlhoot breed. They slip on the little things."

Drawing his knife from his pocket, he cut the lashings that bound the upright to the tree branch. Then, after considerable effort, he managed to wrench the arrow out of the wall. He concealed the whole contraption under his bunk and closed the window. Then, after replacing the bracket lamp and lighting the one in his room, he undressed and went to bed, his eyes dark with thought.

CHAPTER V

Owlhoots' Trick

WALT SLADE was in the saddle early the following morning, riding south to Cooper, the railroad town, twenty miles distant. As he rode he carefully studied the trail and its environs. On the right it was flanked by the mountain wall, rugged, precipitous, practically unclimbable; but on the left it was paralleled by low ridges thickly covered with tall growth. Slade nodded with satisfaction from time to time as he surveyed the terrain.

From time to time he passed empty wagons rumbling south; but as he drew near the town, he met loaded vehicles crawling north.

Upon reaching Cooper, he at once repaired to the railroad telegraph office. Here he sent a long message that caused the operator, sworn to secrecy by the rules of his company, to regard him with lively interest.

From the telegraph office, he proceeded to the local bank and requested an interview with the president. After some hesitation, a clerk admitted him to an inner sanctum where sat the presi-

dent, a bulky old-timer with shrewd, questioning eyes. He was cordial enough, however, and invited Slade to a chair.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked.

"Want to ask a question," The Hawk replied. "When does the stage carrying the Pearson mines payroll leave Cooper?"

The president stiffened, and shot *El Halcon* a suspicious glance.

"I am not at liberty to answer that question," he replied coldly.

Slade, meanwhile, was fumbling with a cunningly concealed pocket in his broad leather belt. He laid something on the official's desk.

The president stared at the object, a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers.

"Why—why—" the president stuttered. "A Ranger! What does this mean?"

"A wire to Captain McNelty at Ranger post headquarters will secure information, if you desire it," Slade replied.

The president shot him a shrewd glance, seemed to study him intently for a moment. He smiled.

"Reckon I don't need any information," he replied. "You got the look and bearing of a Ranger, or what a Ranger should be. No, the star is enough for me. Why do you want to know about the payroll? Do you suspect an attempt on it might be made?"

"I don't know," Slade replied frankly. "I have nothing definite to base such a suspicion on, but I understand it is an unusually heavy payroll, and funny things have been happening in this section of late."

"That's right, on both counts," the president admitted. He looked worried, but shook his head.

"I really don't see how an attempt could be successful," he stated. "We take all possible precautions to safeguard the money. Nobody but trusted officials know on just what stage the money will be. The coach will be heavily guarded. Two men on the outside with shotguns and rifles, with orders to shoot to kill. Two on the inside of the locked coach, similarly armed. The stage leaving Cooper today will be guarded precisely as the one leaving tomorrow; but the stage today will carry nothing of value, while the payroll will be on tomorrow's coach, a day later than would be expected."

Slade nodded thoughtfully.

"Looks safe enough," he agreed; "but I've noticed things don't always work out as expected, and there is a mighty shrewd outfit operating in this section."

"Do you think we should double the guard?" the president asked anxiously.

Slade shook his black head.

"If four men can't fight it out with anything they might happen to run up against, eight couldn't, either," he replied. "What you have to watch against is some smart trick that will take the guards at a disadvantage. What it could be, I've no notion, but I figger to be on the lookout for anything."

"You are going to ride with the stage, then?" the president asked in tones of relief.

Slade smilingly shook his head.

"Don't figger that would help over much," he said. "No, I won't ride with the coach. I'll just be riding."

The president looked bewildered, but forebore to ask questions, doubtless realizing that they would not be answered. A few minutes later Slade shook hands with the bank official and departed. He rode back to Pearson at a leisurely pace.

"If anybody's keeping an eye on us, I figger this move will sort of throw them off the track," he confided to Shadow.

SLADE appeared at both the Alhambra and the Queen High that evening. He nodded to Wes Harlow, who was drinking in the former, and Harlow, not to be outdid, nodded back. He had a drink with Ace Hudson in the Queen High. The immaculately garbed owner was cordial and seemed in an unusually good humor, his black eyes snapping, his thin lips wreathing in smiles. It seemed to Slade there was an air of suppressed excitement about him. Which was not unnatural, The Hawk divined, with the mine payday only a day off.

It was long past midnight when Slade cautiously led Shadow from the livery stable, mounted him and, skirting the

town, rode out of the canyon and south toward Cooper. He did not show up in the railroad town, however. He was not present when the stage pulled out. But when the clumsy vehicle rolled northward along the rutted trail, *El Halcon,* mounted on his great black horse and taking advantage of every bit of concealment, rode the crests of the low ridges that paralleled the trail on the east.

Mile after mile he rode, his eyes eternally fixed on the clumsy vehicle with its two vigilant outside guards, one beside the driver, the second on the boot that crawled northward nearly a mile distant. Mile after mile, and nothing happened. As they drew near the mouth of Skeleton Canyon without mishap, Slade relaxed somewhat.

"Looks like it was a cold hunch," he told Shadow. "They must have—say, what's that heading this way from the north?"

The stage was lumbering toward a bend where the trail curved around a great bulge of the cliff. From where Slade rode, both sides of the bulge were visible. Rolling swiftly out of the north and crowding the trail from edge to edge, were a large number of little bobbing blotches. Behind them, urging them on, were half a dozen or so mounted men. Slade watched their approach with narrowed eyes. At first he thought it was a flock of sheep, but as they drew nearer, he realized his mistake. The bewhiskered, long-fleeced little animals were not sheep.

"Goats!" he exclaimed. "A big herd of goats. Looks like the Bowmans are moving a shipping herd to Cooper. They—good heavens! That's a new one!"

He reined sharply to the left, and touched spur to Shadow. An instant later, the great black horse was tearing through the brush toward the distant trail, where the lumbering stage and the speeding goats were fast drawing together, with the bulge between them.

On the stage, the driver and the guards were in a cheerful mood. The more hazardous portions of the trail were behind them. Only a few miles distant was the mouth of Skeleton Canyon, Pearson, and safety. They chatted together, called remarks to their two companions locked in the coach. Suddenly, however, the driver lifted his head.

"Somethin' comin' this way the other side that bulge," he exclaimed. "Comin' fast—sounds like horses. On your toes, boys."

"What's that 'ba-ain'?" asked one of the guards. "Sounds like sheep, but not like 'em. I wonder—hell and blazes!"

The last ejaculation was shot from him as round the bend poured a multitude of frenzied little creatures, giving tongue to irritation and protest. Behind them shouting, cursing, apparently trying to control them, were a number of mounted men.

"Look out, you loco jugheads!" bawled the stage driver. "Where yuh think you're goin'?"

"We can't hold 'em—they're stampedin'!" bellowed one of the riders in reply.

DOWN upon the coach swooped the flying goats, too frenzied with fear to turn aside. They butted into the legs of the horses, tumbled under their feet, bleating and squealing.

At the touch of the furry bodies, and with the hated smell fuming into their nostrils, the horses went completely insane. They wheeled sideways from the trail, trying to escape the terror that plagued them. The front wheels of the coach cramped under the body and as the horses plunged madly, the clumsy, top-heavy vehicle tipped up, reeled, went over onto its side with a crash, flinging driver and guards like stones from a sling to hit the ground with stunning force. The herders jerked guns and began shooting at the prostrate bodies and the overturned coach. With yells of triumph they swooped forward to the kill.

But their triumphant whoops changed to howls of consternation as a great black horse stormed from the brush flanking the trail. Topping the horse was a tall, ice-eyed man with a blazing gun in each hand.

Under that first murderous volley, three of the killers pitched to the ground. The others fired wildly at the man forking the weaving, dancing black horse. Slade's guns roared again and a fourth

saddle was emptied. The two survivors whirled their horses and fled madly back the way they had come. By the time Slade disentangled Shadow from the milling goats and reached the bulge, they were but brown smudges upon the trail, going like the wind and gaining speed at every jump.

"Hold it, Shadow," he told the black. "If we head after them, they'll leave the trail and hole up somewhere. Let's see how much damage is done back here."

There was plenty. The driver was thrashing about on the ground with a broken leg. One guard lay white and silent beside him. The other was on his feet, staring dazedly, blood streaming down his face. The stage horses, one down, were a kicking, squealing tangle. From inside the overturned coach sounded wild curses and piercing yells.

"Hold it!" Slade roared to the prisoners. "I'll get you out as soon as I clean up this mess. Lend a hand," he told the injured guard. "See if your pard there has a busted neck, and try and quiet the driver."

He dismounted and quickly cut loose the struggling horses. Then he approached the overturned coach and tried the door.

"Shoot the lock off," he told the imprisoned guards. "I'm scared to try it from the outside. The slug might glance and plug one of you."

A moment later a muffled boom sounded inside the coach. The door jerked and rattled. Another moment and it banged open. The bleeding, cursing inside guards climbed out and glared around. Slade, who was kneeling beside the stricken driver, gestured toward the horses of the dead "herders" that stood quietly nearby.

"Catch those saddle broncs," he directed. "Then we'll rig up a stretcher between two of the stage horses and hustle these busted gents to town and the doctor. I'll strap up the driver's leg, but the other fellow is in bad shape, I'm afraid. Got a mighty hefty lick on the head."

While the guards carried out instructions, Slade examined the bodies of the slain owlhoots. They were stocky, swarthy men with hard features, thin lips and lank black hair. Their faces were broad and stamped with a wild beast ferocity. *El Halcon's* eyes glowed with a peculiar light as he studied them. Their pockets revealed nothing of significance, their guns and clothing were ordinary. The horses were good stock, apparently well trained, and bore Mexican brands that told nothing. But nevertheless, Slade's face wore a pleased expression when he finished his examination.

With the wounded men cradled in a makeshift stretcher between two stage horses, and the strongbox containing the payroll money strapped on the back of a third, the cavalcade got under way.

The guards glared vindictively at the scattered goats that, their fears forgotten, were quietly browsing on the chaparral growth.

"Part of them blankety-blank Bowmans' holdin's!" one swore. "I reckon the Harlows have the right notion. The hull nest of them sidewinders had oughta be strung up or run out of the section."

CHAPTER VI

The Vengeance Trail

PEARSON seethed over the attempted holdup. Some folks were inclined to link the Bowmans with the outrage, because of the stratagem of the goats, but it was agreed by most that the brothers should be exonerated. The description of the slain owlhoots gave rise to further and grotesque speculation.

"Apache breeds, that's what they were," declared one of the stage guards, a grizzled old-timer. "I tell yuh Cocha is ridin' again in this section."

"Ghosts don't down by bullets," others scoffed.

"Mebbe *El Halcon* used silver bullets," the guard contended stubbornly. "Yuh can allus down a ghost with a silver bullet."

The statement was received with laughter, but just the same, more than one oldster looked over his shoulder.

Sheriff Jess Cross wasted no time in looking up Walt Slade.

"I can't figger yuh," he told The Hawk. "Yuh got a near-owlhoot rep'tation that stretches all over Texas, but what yuh did today sure doesn't tie up with it."

Slade smiled down at the old peace officer.

"Never can tell which way a pickle will squirt by the look of its hide," he said. "Suppose we drop over to your office and have a talk about it."

The sheriff looked surprised, but offered no objection. Ten minutes later he was staring dazedly at the silver star of the Rangers and listening to Slade's suggestions.

"I figger the hellions will make a last try for a big clean-up," *El Halcon* told him. "I've a notion they're getting a mite worried and mebbe aim to high-tail out of the section. I'm playing a hunch, but I've played them before, and found them work out. The stage will be all set for a play like I figger they'll make, and the stakes are worth it. They're not liable to get another chance at such a big killing, from what the president of the Cooper bank told me."

"That's right," agreed the sheriff. "Some mighty rich pockets were tapped during the past month. It's the biggest cleanup ever. Mebbe we'll lay the ghost of Cocha for good this time," he added with a chuckle.

"Yes," Slade replied gravely, "if things work out right, we will."

Sheriff Cross stared. "Yuh don't mean to tell me yuh take stock in them yarns about Cocha ridin' his spiritland here in the canyon?" he exclaimed incredulously.

Slade's reply bewildered and astounded the old peace officer.

"Yes," The Hawk replied quietly, "the spirit of Cocha is in Skeleton Canyon tonight, alive and very real."

"Either you're makin' game of me or you're plumb loco," Sheriff Cross declared with conviction.

Thanks to Walt Slade, Pearson's payday celebration got under way on schedule. Long before nightfall, the crooked main street was black with men. Brawny miners in muddy boots, corduroys and red, blue or plaid woolen shirts rubbed shoulders with lithe cowboys in from the spreads to take part in the hilarity. Gamblers in somber black relieved by the snowy fronts of their ruffled shirts threaded their way through the jostling throng, heading for their tables and getting set for the night's harvest. There was a sprinkling of Mexican *vaqueros* in black velvet adorned with much silver and of dance floor girls with toored lips and alert eyes. Bewhiskered prospectors, in from the hills, were present. Well dressed ranch owners puffed cigars and moved about with dignity. Mine officials chatted with them. Teamsters, shotgun guards, barkeeps and shop owners were present, pausing to converse with acquaintances or hurrying to their places of business.

A long, steadily moving line passed before the grilled windows of the paymasters and received each their portion of the fortune in gold and silver coin that was passed across the counters. The bars were lined with men who emptied glasses, thumped them on the "mahogany" and bellowed for refills. The eating houses were jammed with citizens laying solid foundations that later would be sluiced down with liquid refreshment. Orchestras blared, song was bellowed. Boots thumped and high heels clicked on the dance floors.

FALLING darkness found the gaiety on the increase. Bars, poker tables, faro banks and roulette wheels were doing a roaring business. Everybody seemed to have plenty of money, and everybody seemed bent on spending it in the shortest time possible.

Most crowded of all was Ace Hudson's Queen High Saloon. But Ace himself, it was noted, was not in evidence at his usual place at the far end of the bar.

"He went upstairs with a bad headache just after dark," bartenders explained to questioners. "Said he'd come down in a coupla hours or so."

Also absent was Walt Slade. He had ridden to Cooper early in the morning and, so far as anyone knew, had not returned.

In striking contrast to the hilarity on the streets and in the bars, was the silence and darkness of the mine buildings. At the great Alhambra Mine stamp mill all was darkness save for a single dim light glowing in the main of-

fice and reflecting from the shining face of the huge iron safe that guarded the monthly clean-up of the various mills. A solitary watchman moved about, but otherwise the buildings seemed utterly deserted.

Toward midnight the watchman repaired to his little shack for his lunch. Engrossed in his food, he did not hear the soft click of the padlock that secured the door of the shack from the outside and locked him in. Nor did he hear the soft footsteps approaching the door of the main office. Even had he been outside the shack, it is doubtful whether he would have heard the snap of the broken lock as the office door was skillfully pried open.

From the outer darkness, into the dimly lighted interior, filed four men, hatbrims pulled low, neckerchiefs swathing their faces. They hesitated, listened intently, glanced toward the closed door of an inner office. One glided to the door and tried the knob. It resisted his efforts. Apparently reassured, the men approached the ponderous safe. From a sack one carried, a tall man who towered over his squat companions, took a shining steel drill and a powerful brace.

He set the point of the drill against the face of the safe, just above the combination knob. There followed a steady grating, as if a rat were gnawing under the floor. His companions grouped about him, intent on the progress of the drilling. The man holding the sack took from it a squat black can and a small funnel. Followed a length of snaky fuse.

So engrossed were the four in their occupation, they did not notice the door of the inner office swing noiselessly back on oiled hinges. They whirled at the sound of a step.

Walt Slade, his eyes icily cold, his face set in granite lines, stepped into the room. On his broad chest gleamed a deputy sheriff's badge. In his right hand he held a long black gun, its unwavering muzzle trained on the group around the safe. After him came Sheriff Jess Cross and a crowding group of deputies.

Slade's voice rang out like a trumpet blast of sound. "Elevate! You're covered! In the name of the State of Texas, I arrest Ace Hudson and—"

The tall man who crouched over the safe let out a yell of fury. He surged erect, hand streaking to the heavy gun swinging at his hip, the neckerchief dropping from his face to reveal the Queen High saloon owner's contorted features. But even as the gun cleared leather, Slade fired, his Colt booming sullenly between the walls of the room.

Ace Hudson screamed, an animal-like scream of rage and pain. He reeled back against the safe, the gun dropping from his hand. Then, with a second scream, he hurled himself straight at the muzzle of Slade's flaming gun. Heedless of the slugs that battered his body, he closed with The Hawk. A flailing fist knocked the gun from Slade's grasp. Hudson's fingers, like talons of steel, coiled about his throat. Slade tore at his corded wrists but was unable to free himself from the other's grip of maniacal strength.

He could hear the roar of the sheriff's guns and the answering shots of the safe blowers as he and Hudson reeled across the room. Red flashes stormed

[*Turn page*]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

before his eyes. His breath choked in his constricted throat. He hurled Hudson sideways, but the other's grip did not loosen. They caromed into a desk, sending it crashing over in a splintered ruin.

Chairs went to matchwood under their feet. They swept a table clear across the room and knocked down two deputies with it. Sheriff Cross and the others were ducking and dodging, trading lead with the three owlhoots and at the same time trying to get in a shot that would miss Slade and wing Hudson. Slade battered at Hudson's madman face but the other, blood pouring from his mouth and the gaping wounds in his breast, held on.

His face black with suffocation, his brain reeling, Slade gripped Hudson's wrists once more and whirled himself around and around, lifting the saloonkeeper's feet clear of the floor. With a final mighty effort that took every ounce of his failing strength, he tore the clutching fingers from his throat and hurled Hudson across the room.

HUDSON'S body thudded against the wall and slid to the floor in a bloody heap. Slade, breathing in great gasps, staggered across the room and knelt beside the dying man. Hudson glared up at him with eyes of hate, strained to raise his clutching hands, but could not.

"Curse yuh!" he choked through the blood bubbling in his throat. "Curse yuh! Why did you have to horn in!"

With a shaking hand, Slade held the star of the Rangers before Hudson's glazing eyes. He spoke, his words coming thickly, evenly spaced.

"Trail's end, *Cocha!* The end of a vengeance trail for you. It's a bad trail to ride, Cocha—the vengeance trail!"

Hudson strained to raise himself from the floor, choked, and fell back dead.

Behind Slade sounded a gasp of astonishment. Sheriff Cross was leaning forward, staring incredulously at the dead man.

"*Cocha!*" he muttered. "I saw Cocha once, long ago. This hellion is him, only lighter colored and younger lookin'. For gosh sake, Slade, what does it mean? Do the spirits of the dead really walk the earth again?"

Walt Slade straightened up, slipping the silver star out of sight as the deputies turned from the bodies of the dead owlhoots their guns had downed.

"A man's spirit lives on, in the persons of his children," he replied to the sheriff. "Yes, Cocha's spirit, with all its hate and devilishness and vindictiveness, lived on, in the person of his son!"

"His son!" gasped the sheriff.

"Yes," Slade replied, gesturing to the dead man at his feet. "Cocha's son, who swore an oath of vengeance over his grave. Ace Hudson was Cocha's son."

Later, in the sheriff's office, Slade explained in greater detail. Present were Wes Harlow and Sime Bowman, rounded up by the sheriff at Slade's direction. They glowered at one another, but curiosity held their tempers in leash.

"Yes, Hudson was Cocha's son," Slade repeated. "The son of the man killed by the cavalry captain, Sime Bowman's father, in the big fight here in Skeleton Canyon, twenty years ago. Over the war chief's grave, young Cocha, named for his father, swore an oath of vengeance. But the cavalry captain died before he could wreak it on him. Naturally, with the vindictiveness of people who continue a blood feud from generation to generation, his hate was transferred to the sons of the captain, and when Sime Bowman and his brothers showed up in this section, he thought his chance had come."

"How did yuh figger Hudson as young Cocha?" asked the sheriff.

Slade rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand before replying. When the smoke was going strongly, he resumed.

"Guess work, to a certain extent. I knew that after the Mangas Apaches drifted into Arizona, they were finally placed on a reservation along with the Mescaleros and others. It was logical to believe that young Cocha, the war chief's son, was one of their number. Which made it easy to get a line on him.

"I telegraphed Captain McNelty at Ranger headquarters, requesting him to learn what he could about Cocha and his movements. He wired back that young Cocha had slipped away from the reser-

vation some years back. He didn't show his Apache blood and it was easy for him to pass as a pure white. Some homing instinct, I reckon, brought him back to Skeleton Canyon after the gold strike and he set up business here.

"He did well, but I figger he had already gone in for owlhooting. Anyhow, he started widelooping and robbing. The Bowmans coming along when they did and getting into a row with the Harlows played into his hands. He did all he could to keep the kettle boiling, hoping that the Harlows would do for the Bowmans, the men he hated.

"He had a try or two at them himself, like the day one of his halfbreeds that he brought from the Arizona reservation nearly did for Sime down at the canyon mouth. Right then, incidentally, I knew that somebody besides the Harlows were on the prod against the Bowmans."

"How did yuh know that?" Sime Bowman asked. "I rec'lect right after the shootin' yuh intimated as much."

"Because," Slade replied, "it would have been humanly impossible for one of the Harlows to get around to the end of that bench and sneak back in time to take that shot at you. Of course, it could have been one of their outfit they'd holed up there, but seeing as it was evidently by chance they ran into Arn Bowman and chased him down the sag, it seemed to me mighty improbable.

"Your brother rode on to your spread that day, while the rest of you headed for town, isn't that right, Harlow?" he asked.

"That's right," Wes Harlow replied. "Tom wasn't feelin' so peart, so after you scared the livin' daylights out of us, he decided to head for home."

SLADE nodded, and continued. "The first time I saw Ace Hudson, I thought he had the look of a breed. Then Sime told me the story of the big fight here, and a notion began to shape up in my head. Next, Hudson played into my hands by trying to kill me with that bow and arrow contraption he had rigged up in the window of my room.

"I recognized the bow as an Apache bow, and the business had all the earmarks of an Apache trick. I was sure my hunch was right when I downed those owlhoots who tried to hold up the payroll stage. They were Apache breeds, all four of them, just like the three the sheriff and his boys did for tonight."

"And then you played a hunch they would make a try for the mine clean-up, after fallin' down on the payroll job," interpolated the sheriff.

"That's right," Slade replied. "It was the logical thing for them to do, especially as they were getting sort of jittery. My showing up in this section worried them."

"Knew *El Halcon's* reputation and figgered yuh were set to horn in on their game," nodded the sheriff.

"Something like that," Slade smiled. He turned to Wes Harlow and Sime Bowman.

"And I've a notion," he said, "that you two gents had a lesson tonight of what comes of feudin'. Perhaps after this, Harlow, you can come down off your perch and be human. Incidentally, if you weren't so bull-headed, you would have learned before now that goats don't destroy range like sheep. They don't even eat much grass. They browse, off twigs and leaves and berries. Now suppose you two shorthorns stop pawin' sod and get together."

Cattleman and goat rancher eyed each other a moment, then Wes Harlow grinned, a trifle sheepishly.

"Reckon it's up to me to take the fust bite of crow, Bowman," he said. "Suppose we just forget everythin' what's happened and start all over. And—here's my hand on it!"

Slade stood up, smiling down at them, his gray eyes all kindness.

"That's better," he applauded. "Now I can leave feeling good. Yes, I've got to be riding. Captain Jim will have another little chore ready for me by the time I get back to the post."

He rode away through the moonlight, sitting gracefully atop his great black horse, strumming the strings of his guitar and singing in his rich, sweet voice:

Oh, we're singin' and we're laughin',
And we're dancin' 'neath the moon—
For the Palo Pinto shipping herd
Has crossed the Cimarro-o-on!

Desperation sped Peewee's hand as he tipped up the open-toed holster

Fate's Little Helper

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

Peewee Selden, who came from Missouri, believed in the help of fortune — but not enough to leave his gun home!

PEEWEE SELDEN got the idea when he first had the recurring and annoying throat irritation that visited him without season and without warning, bringing a husk to his throat that made talking both an effort and almost a futility.

That was in the third year of his fencing off his section of West Texas plains, to which he had come from his native Missouri, and started his hopeful spread with a handful of cattle and a heart full of hope.

That was close to a year before Bad Bill Boysenbee had swirled up in the dust of a half-dozen cowhands and

several hundred of cattle, to claim the section lying south of Peewee's markers.

Not that Peewee blamed Bad Bill, exactly. He didn't. Man was as the Creator made him and fate steered him. And the same hand that could create a gentle and shy little, broad-shouldered, mild-voiced man like Charles "Peewee" Selden, could also ordain a neighbor like big, mustached, swashbuckling Bill Boysenbee.

This, Pewee accepted, though with his gray eyes sad, and now and again mildly rebellious. When Bad Bill's waterholes went dry in the drought of that second summer and the breezy, burly and bepistoled neighboring rancher had kicked Peewee's fencing down, to admit his thirsty herds to Peewee's section, Peewee had been philosophic about it.

"Keep your shirt on, Buck-Tooth," he had mildly reproved his lone hired hand. "The Lord made him as well as he did me. The Lord gave him cattle as well as he gave me cattle. I reckon I woulda invited Bill to use my water, if he hadn't got sort of previous about it and acted on his own. Reading my mind, almost, you might say. Keep cool, Buck-Tooth."

Buck-Tooth Gorman, who lived in the range shack over beyond the canyon that cut the spread, was sour with the sourness of a man who sees his living being taken from him, and wants to do something about it.

"Keep cool? Huh! Boysenbee will be claimin' our water-source for himself, if you let him work this raw deal on yuh! Yeah, he has more'n we have, in numbers! But there's other small spreads around here will stand with us ag'in him! They got to stand with us ag'in him! Bad Bill Boysenbee is just the type to hog it all, give him one little chance."

"Plenty water for all," Peewee had murmured. "Plenty. Soon as we get a wet spell, and Bill's waterholes fill up again, he'll let our springs be and pull out. Then we'll up the fence like it was before."

"Acts like them springs was his!" had been Buck-Tooth's rejoinder. "Acts like everything in Las Verdes Town is his, too!"

That had brought a flush to Peewee's weathered cheeks. He wasn't getting any younger. He'd reached his mid-twenties and had started through them with it painfully on his mind that his years were lonely ahead of him, unless. . . .

When that "unless" popped into his head, it was always accompanied by a mental picture of apple-cheeked Martha Ogilvie, who helped her pa keep store over to Las Verdes Town.

And for a time, it seemed that Martha's eyes shone with more than merely casual interest, whenever Peewee rode in to tie his pinto to the rail by Ogilvie's Hardware & Feed.

But a man with a small spread and one lone helper didn't have the time that a man with a half-dozen helpers had. And soon Peewee's medium-tall frame, with the broad shoulders that made him look less than the man he was, was reversing the procedure of having a short drink at the Longhorn Saloon and spending the balance of the evening at Martha's.

Pretty soon, Peewee was looking in on Martha for a short visit, and spending the rest of the night in the Longhorn Saloon, listening to talk of the new railroad, of The Whisperer, of the Free-Silver Idea, of the Single-Tax Idea.

There just wasn't much point in courting a girl when she already had other company there ahead of him. And Bad Bill Boysenbee was always there at Martha's before Peewee.

A man who believed less in fate than Peewee Selden might have forced the issue, one way or another. Such a man would have braced Bad Bill about the way Bad Bill had restored the fences about the water-source. For as Buck-Tooth had sourly predicted, Boysenbee had claimed the water for his own, and even had pointed out to Peewee the marker-stakes, which he later had moved northward with the sly help of other hands than lawful.

Such a man might have left off calling at Martha's altogether, or even maybe have signed Bad Bill out of town to a showdown with blazing six-guns.

THE water-mark in the stream slowly receded in the north quarter and Peewee's slowly growing herd became

restless with thirst, and pressed the fence where Boysenbee maintained a vigilant barrier.

And rumor had it that Martha Ogilvie had apparently made up her mind, and was starting to freight the empty, iron-handled chests that stood in the Ogilvie hall, with table linens, curtains, silver, patchwork quilts, and the other necessities for a bride-to-be.

It was in Las Verdes Town that Peewee met Bad Bill Boysenbee under the overhang of the Palace Hotel, and tried to step out of the larger man's way, only to be blocked effectively.

"I'm warning you, Selden," Bad Bill boomed in his heaviest tones. "You keep yore cattle out of my range!" The big man paused while the townspeople turned from their occupations to watch and listen. "In fact, Selden—just plain keep clear o' my path altogether! I'm not a-tellin' you again, neither!"

Bad Bill's words were fighting talk in the milder east. In West Texas, they were the warning of gunfire.

In a way, Las Verdes Town welcomed the snarled challenge. The steady, quiet growing of the contention between Peewee Selden and Bad Bill Boysenbee had long since caused a rift in the reasonably placid life of the thriving cowtown.

There were those who claimed that Peewee was just too good a fellow to be taken advantage of.

There were others who argued that if the Lord had created Bad Bill and Peewee out of dissimilar molds, Colt had provided the equalizer in the six-gun that Peewee wore slung from his hip.

But still others voiced the opinion that the gun favored the lawless, and they cited the ever-growing rapaciousness of The Whisperer. The Whisperer was the nickname, the trade-mark, of a ruthless road agent who was terrorizing the communities to the east of Las Verdes Town with his whispered commands to shotgun guards, bank tellers and unwary travelers, before he relieved them of their wealth; or as was often the case, of their lives, as well.

It was agreed that the lithe, lean, masked man who worked his will with his quiet voice and his loud guns, was among the West's most cold-blooded killers.

It was agreed, too, that it was time something should pop in the silent duel for survival that quiet little Peewee Selden was waging against Bad Bill Boysenbee.

"Keep yore tracks clear o' mine altogether!" Bad Bill snapped again. "You hear me, Selden?"

Peewee heard. He heard, and he stood in quiet contemplation of the lost years that lay behind him. Three years, since he had staked out his section as casually as he would have hung his Stetson on a peg in the Palace Hotel dining room.

But Peewee had seen where Boysenbee could convince many of his rights in the matter. Land wasn't settled so very carefully, with so much of it available. A mistake in a quarter-mile could be made, and often was. Since there was water for all, why press into an uneven battle over it?

And when the squeeze did come, the matter had been too long ignored by Peewee to give him the backing that the same protest, made a year or so earlier, would have provided him.

Peewee moved, now; but careful he was to keep his hands away from his guns. This thing ought to be settled amicably. A proper man had a right to work for the luxury of a good neighbor. Peewee had found that good things come only by working for them. A good neighbor should be had the same way. By working hard to make him a good neighbor.

He swallowed several times to oil his throat-chords. Of late, the throat trouble that had been occasionally his since childhood had returned to bother him more and more.

Dust worked on that tender throat. Dust, and dry-spells, and fatigue, and emotion. When Peewee was extra tired or dry or upset, it affected him most. His throat crackled, almost.

A year ago when he had seen Martha alone, for one whole afternoon, and the dryness had been on it, the girl had coaxed him to let her look at it. Feeling foolish, Peewee had.

"It's spotted, sort of," Martha had said, her nearness dizzying him and making him glad he had the mild affliction to bring her so close to him. "Coated with gray, like dust. So that

the flesh-color shows like spots. Mother gets it like that in the hay-season. But mother has me to take care of her, to look after her. Someone should see that you take care of yourself, too, Charles."

That was his chance, Peewee told himself wildly. His chance to blurt that he wanted someone to take care of him and his modest ranchhouse and his life.

He tried to speak; but only a dried whisper rustled in his throat, and when he tried again he brought on a paroxysm of coughing that forced him to turn away from the vision that was looking at him so tenderly and so expectantly. Or did he only imagine that part?

But it wasn't his imagination that Martha's father and mother rushed into the room with anxious faces; and then the chance was gone. And it was not six months after that when the talk started that Martha was filling her hope-chest.

It angered Peewee, standing in the stilled and tense street facing Bad Bill Boysenbee, that when he could have talked, he didn't. And when he wanted to, he couldn't.

HE WANTED to say, "Take it easy, Bill. We're neighbors. Rightfully, that's my water, and you know it. But there has been enough for all—until now. Now my cattle have it the way yours did when I let you knock my fences over to save them. How's for you taking your fences down from my water, and your gun-guards from my property, an' let me save my cattle?"

But it wouldn't come, his voice, his words. He was aware of a dark anger pulsing a vein in his throat when his lips moved but the words wouldn't come.

"Yore lips move, but you don't make no noises like a man," Bad Bill jibed, his voice still loud enough to carry to the listeners. "But I'll make noises with my gun should I find you horsing about my fences, Selden. An' if you think I don't mean it, you got my invitation to go for yore gun!"

Peewee's gun-hand twitched; but then he had a flashing vision of a girl's face pressed to the window of the hotel, from inside. And of open-mouthed travelers staring from other windows and doorways.

So he held it, that readying hand, and he went still, no longer even trying to work his reluctant voice, and at length Bad Bill Boysenbee came relaxed and with a grin of cool contempt pushed past Peewee and strode down the street.

"Yellow!" someone said, from the region in back of Peewee. "I felt sorry for him, up to now. But a man who won't fight for his rights ain't got no rights, in this West Texas!"

His face crimson and his eyes savage, Peewee moved slowly along to the bat-wings of the Longhorn Saloon and went through the gathering at the door with a dogged tread.

"Straight whiskey, Matt," he tried to tell the barkeep, whose back was turned while he sought a bottle for another customer.

That didn't come, either. He tried again; and it came this time, but in a husked voice that was close to a whisper.

"Straight whiskey!"

The effect on the Irish bartender was magical. His entire body went rigid. "The Whisperer!" he gasped.

After his first stunned surprise, Peewee laughed, and the action relaxed his vocal-chords, and he had his voice again, though it was thin.

"Straight whiskey, Matt," he said, with a chuckle. "The whispering was accidental. Sorry I scared you. Man, you look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

Matt fixed his customer with a withering glare. "The likes of you shouldn't try to scare the likes of me, Peewee," he said, indicating the scene of the recent meeting of the two neighbors with a jerk of his head. "I'm sore dissapointed in you, man! Where will you move to?"

"I won't," Peewe said quietly. "I'll stay."

"You'll have to move, man. Give a dog a bad name, you know? No offense, now. Merely repeating the saying."

Peewee nodded, his eyes somber. Later, he was thoughtful when he heard Mr. Ogilvie say that his daughter was out. The way he said it, Peewee knew she would never be in to him, so far as Mr. Ogilvie was concerned.

He was thinking of public opinion as he rode slowly back along the trail to his beset spread.

"Maybe Buck-Tooth is right," he mused, sorrowfully. "Maybe fate needed a little help, and I was too slow on the draw for fate."

But that started it, his thinking about many things. About Fate. About public opinion. About how far a man has a right to go in trying to be a good fellow, a good neighbor. About how far a man should let a girl get away from him before he speaks his mind and his heart.

AFTER a bad afternoon of hazing the weakening cattle along to where a mere trickle of water was still affording life-sustaining drink, Peewee and Buck-Tooth sat down in Buck-Tooth's shack to a dreary meal of jerked-beef, cold beans and scratch-back.

"Not even coffee," Buck-Tooth grumbled. "Not enough water so's we can take some fer coffee; an' that bluff-runnin' ranny astraddlin' yore own legal water."

Peewee grinned slightly at the recurring thought. He'd thought about it a long time, and now he said it: "Bad Bill is a bluff, yes. It was that in his makeup made me to hold off him. I—I hate to show a man up in front of his workers and friends and townsmen. I guess I got a strong weakness in me, Buck-Tooth. Which is, 'Live and let live.' If it don't matter too much, I incline to let a man rear up and speak loud and like that, whilst I go about my own business. But I got an idea today up to Matt's." Peewee rolled a smoke and told it slowly, chuckling. Even Buck-Tooth laughed, despite his sadness, when he heard how Matt had quaked at the whisper that Peewee had been forced to when ordering a whiskey.

Peewe said, "It shows you how a name, or a reputation, can make or break a man. The Whisperer is tough, they say; so my voice, in a whisper, frightens a man like Matt. Well, it's the same with Bad Bill. Like as not, he called himself that name of 'Bad' Bill. He's worked himself into figuring he is a *muy malo hombre*. He'll fight and die to prove it. Unless!"

Buck-Tooth grinned. "Unless what?"

"Unless he gave ground to a man the town thought was tougher. Like The Whisperer."

Buck-Tooth stared. "You mean . . . you mean you or me pose as The Whisperer? Masked; an' whisperin' an' offerin' them guns fer convincers if he didn't pull his illegal fences down?"

"Naw." Peewee smiled. "Nothing that foolish. But you know how Bad Bill is always around Las Verdes Town? At Matt's place?"

Buck-Tooth nodded. "And Ogilvie's," he said sourly. "So?"

"Well, supposin' now, just supposin', The Whisperer was to come sawing in to stage a holdup? The Longhorn has lots of gold, we know. Everybody knows. Let's say The Whisperer knows. So he comes sawin' in, his guns ready to mow down opposition, an' Matt passes him the poke real fast. He would, too!

"All right. And then, let's say a ranny comes in and faces The Whisperer down, see? Makes him give back the money. What would they do with such a man?"

Buck-Tooth said, awed, "Why, give him the town, even!"

"Sure. Public opinion working! Well, suppose that tough-talking ranny was to swing on someone he has a fight on with. Say Bad Bill Boysenbee? What do you think would happen then?"

Buck-Tooth roared his mirth and slapped his knee with a hard hand. "Bad Bill would be Sweet William fer shore!"

But after a moment, he sobered. "About th' onliest thing would save you is a miracle. And I'd do anything short of cuttin' my throat from one ear to the other if it would help. But Sheriff Pitcher is too good a gunner, an' there's too much chance of some gun-happy or booze-happy ranny makin' a play to get The Whisperer, fer me to chance it. If not, I'd plumb love to play-act I was The Whisperer. Anyway, The Whisperer never would chance a stick-up like that."

"Nobody," Peewee sighed, his weathered face morose, "knows what The Whisperer would do. He never does the same thing twice. Except kill a man. But you're right, Buck-Tooth, I was just dreamin'. All that will save me is fate —that or rain."

"Place yore bets on fate," Buck-Tooth said glumly. "Rain ain't even possible, let alone likely. Not a cloud in the sky. Everything as dry as tinder, and the

sun hot as a brandin' iron. You shoulda helped fate whilst there was yet time, Peewee."

Peewee Selden nodded, his eyes heavy on his world that was coming to an end.

TWO DAYS later, Peewee saddled his his pinto and jogged to town to have a talk with Lawyer Souss. He couldn't find the man at his shanty-office, in the street, at the hotel. So he went to the Longhorn where he saw Souss lying back in a chair in a corner, eyes shut, mouth open, snoring loudly.

"Been at it two days," Matt said, flicking a hand caressingly to smooth his generous mustaches. He grinned mirthlessly. "Bad Bill is over yonder in that other corner. You want to see him?"

Peewee winced slightly. "Make it a whiskey, Matt. In fact, make it a double. I feel tough."

"You look it," Matt shrugged, "but you don't act it. I—" The man paused, his eyes fixed beyond Peewee. "Glory be!"

Peewee blinked, started to twist his head to see what had caught Matt's attention; and then he was staring wide eyed into the mirror behind the bar at the figure that stood close behind him—a figure with a 'kerchief mask pulled up over the nose to rim just under a pair of hard, bright eyes.

"Steady, barkeep! Steady!" The sibilant whisper brought a stiffening of the men who were at the bar, nearby. "Just very gently get the money-poke up onto the counter, friend . . . just very gently. Steady, now, friend. Steady, bartender."

Matt stood transfixed, his arms paralyzed, his hands resting on the bar. The masked man backed a few steps, his neck swiveling rapidly to let those sharp, bright eyes rake the room, touch the door, rake back.

Peewee's heart jumped and he nearly shouted his disbelief. But here it was! Right in front of him, just as he and Buck-Tooth had talked it over! Sweat broke out on Peewee's brow when he realized the danger of interruption that they were in, before they could work out this dreamed-up scene.

"You—you're a fool," he said hoarsely, his own voice coming in a strong whisper, rising to a tense, low pitch. "This won't work, and you know it!" He had swung, his eyes hard on the masked face. "Get out, and quick, before someone comes in and plugs you! Get going, you thick-headed ranny, afore someone starts to shoot! This won't work, and we know it!"

The masked man waggled his gun at Peewee, menacingly, and growled, "Back up, brother. You, bartender—come alive an' do what I said! The pokes is in here waitin' for the stage; and not in the office safe next door. I know it. Produce!"

Peewee, without turning his gaze from the man, said, "Stand like you are, Matt!" He raised his voice as loud as he could; but it still came in a loud whisper, his throat muscles were so rigid in his alarm. "Go on, now, get out, you!"

The masked face held his, the bright eyes expressionless above the 'kerchief. Peewee forced a laugh.

"Nobody shoot!" he husked. "Nobody! Okay, friend—git! An' git quick before I take your gun an' beat your ears off your thick head! That stuff may go east o' here, but it ain't impressing us none. Get out! Get out now!"

The masked face held motionless, then darted in a half-dozen directions as the eyes marked windows, doors, corners, possible ambushes. It came back again, fixing on Peewee.

"Friend?" the husked whisper came. "Friend? You're only three steps from death! Back clear, yuh hear?"

Peewee was ready to shout his impatience with Buck-Tooth's crazy play, with his helper's misguided attempt to carry through on the fanciful scene that the two had hatched while they were having their supper that night in the range-shack.

"You fool!" he wanted to yell. "You dumb ranny! Git! If they wise up, if some trigger-happy gent cuts down on you, the yarn will be we framed this hold-up because we were desperate for money! Git! Oh, Buck-Tooth, git, and quick!"

But he couldn't. He couldn't even whisper it. Because a head had poked up above the low batwing doors and was staring at the scene of the masked man

menacing the room of spell-bound men.

And featuring the face that stared in on the scene were the prominent teeth that protruded from under a writhed-back lip.

Peewee's eyes went out of focus with the shock of it, and he gasped. And despite the danger of it, so good was his expression, so truly did it depict the stunned surprise that Buck-Tooth's appearance at the batwing's brought to Peewee, that the masked man whipped his head around, a strangled cry bubbling to his lips.

Then Peewee moved, desperation speeding the trained hand that grasped the walnut grip of the six-gun and tipped up the gun still holstered in the free-swinging, open-toed short scabbard.

With the gun still in the holster, Peewee fired. Once, and again. The room roared to the shots; and to a third when the masked man fired. But the third slug tore into the floor planking as The Whisperer went to his knees, kicked over and lay still. The uproar that broke loose was pierced by Matt's shouts. "Glory be! Glory be!"

Peewee's voice cut into it, desperate still. "Matt. That double-whiskey. I need it. And pour another one. For Bill Boysenbee. I got some news for him that is liable to upset the gentleman. That ranny was sure-enough The Whisperer!"

Matt guffawed, the color coming back to his face. "And who would you have us think you took him for—Little Bo-Peep?"

Peewee met Buck-Tooth's still-awed stare with a slight wink. "Oh, I just thought it was one of fate's little helpers, Matt." He broke it off sharply. "You, Boysenbee! Hold it right there! We got us some business, neighbor—about a bit of fence to come down."

"Make it fast," Buck-Tooth snapped. "I come to town to tell you if we don't git water quick, I'm gonna shoot the cattle. Make it fast."

They did. Buck-Tooth and Bad Bill did, that is. Peewee had some business with the Ogilvies, and he didn't need help. He didn't even need fate's help, because he knew it was already fated that way.

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With lightning suddenness the five pound hammer struck Keiss' jaw

BOOTHILL BLACKSMITH

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

When his benefactor was murdered, Ole Swanson couldn't get that lump out of his throat till he vented it on the killers!

GIVING the iron wagon wheel tire a final lick with the hammer, Ole Swanson lifted his body around. For a moment his bleak gray eyes considered distantly the man sitting the black horse. He had never liked Dolph Keiss—for no particular reason that he could think of, either. Keiss always dressed well. He rode good horses, but never seemed to have a source of income.

"Hey, Swede, reckon you could put a new rowel in this spur?" Keiss squinted his shoe button eyes at Swanson, his browned face, as usual, scowling. "Seem to of knocked one out somewhere."

Ole scowled back and considered the spur Keiss was holding out to him. He stood bareheaded in the sun, naked to the waist. Sweat glistened on his corded biceps, and the smooth, broad shoulders that never seemed to tan. Finally his shaggy yellow locks moved.

"Yah, ay bane fix, no?" He reached forward to take the spur.

"Okay." Keiss tossed down a silver dollar. He contrived to miss Swanson so that the coin fell into the dirt before the ramshackle, wide open building that housed the blacksmith shop.

"I'll pick the spur up on my way out of town," Keiss flung over his shoulder as he went on at a lope up the street.

"Ay bane figger that feller crook, yah," Swanson muttered, watching him go. He leaned over to retrieve the dollar, considering it suspiciously as he entered the airy shop.

When Swanson fell into his usually unsuspected dialect, it meant he was very disturbed, and mad. This time deep emotion roved through him. Choosing a notched rowel from stock and pinning it into the spur shank was a mere five minute job. Yet Swanson took several times that long as his homely face became a deep study over the anvil where he worked.

The whole rangeland was up in arms over the wanton killing of Devar Rhodes, the late owner of the Spade outfit. There wasn't any doubt about the slayer's identity, either. Banty Bill Dade, the outlaw, had come to the Blackwater ranges a few months before. Last week Rhodes with two of his men ran right into Banty Bill making off with a few head of Spade steers. The outlaw shot once, and the fifty year old cowman fell dead out of his saddle. Rhodes' men had been some distance behind him, and Dade got away. Before he was out of sight, he had been joined by a second rider, whom the cowhands had not been able to recognize.

SWANSON had not said much, yet he was more concerned over the killing, perhaps, than any other man in Blackwater. When he had come to New Mexico two years before, a gangling, oversized, awkward young man of twenty-two, Devar Rhodes had given him a job. On the Spade it hadn't taken him long to learn the business of being a cowboy. But it was in the blacksmith shop that he had progressed most. Swanson had a knack for handling iron. Shoeing horses, repairing machinery, and making ranch tools came easy, and with dispatch to him. It got so that neighbors brought their iron work to the Spade, asking favors of Rhodes because of Swanson's expertness.

After he'd been at the Spade more than a year the kindly old cowman summoned him to the house.

"Look here, Swede," he began. "Blackwater needs a blacksmith shop, and you're a young fellow got the hands for that business. You better quit here an' go into business for yoreself."

"Business takes money," Swanson said after thinking a couple of minutes.

"It does that, but you've let most of your wages ride on the book. I'll let you have whatever more you need."

So, Swanson had come to Blackwater, bought the old shed, got some tools and gone to work. His friendliness and his ability, brought him customers so fast he could hardly take care of them. From the first his business paid so well that he soon was able to get entirely out of debt and have money left. For no sooner had he become a citizen of Blackwater than his eyes fell on the handsome, lithe Bernetta, daughter of Helms the general store man.

The world looked very rosy to Swanson—until Devar Rhodes was murdered by Banty Bill Dade. Never loquacious, Swanson promptly became one of the most silent men in the town. For all his size, his great strength, he felt helpless. Yet he hoped somehow that he might take a hand in vengeance against the pint-sized, no-good little outlaw.

But how? In his mind Swanson had gone over many possibilities. None of them were any good. He had never learned to handle a six-shooter, and with a rifle he was no marksman at all. Even had he this knowledge, there was still the matter of being able to find Banty Bill Dade, which so far not even Sheriff Mikesell had been able to accomplish.

In Swede's business a man who listened well picked up much gossip

from the range men and the few farmers who patronized him. In this way he could assemble many pieces of odd information towards definite conclusions. From such scraps he was of the opinion Banty Bill Dade got his supplies right in Blackwater. It could even be that since the slaying, the outlaw had actually been in town.

After fixing the spur Swede went to the open front to glance at the sun well over towards the horizon. He decided against doing any more work. It was nearly sundown anyway.

Hanging the spur on a nail projecting from the north side of the entrance, he removed the leather apron and went around to the two rooms behind the shop where he lived. Keiss when he came along would see the spur and pick it up.

Swede washed up carefully, put on a pair of striped wool pants, and selected a red flannel shirt. Pulling the garment on, he looked at himself in the broken mirror hanging on the wall. The shirt had pearl shell buttons up the right side, and fastened over against the shoulder. Next he slipped on a pair of boots from his Spade days. He completed his attire with a floppy hat and walked up the street.

The hurdy-gurdy saloons occupied the west side of the street. The other contained the few business places in Blackwater.

He turned in the dying sunlight and entered the Helms general store. Walking through an opening in the counter, he made for the inside office. There at the table, where he expected they would be, sat Sheriff Mikesell and the store owner engrossed in a perpetual game of seven-up.

The sheriff's bronzed head turned on its long neck to glance at Swanson.

"Hiya, Swede," he drawled.

Helms played a card to take a trick. When he dropped another on the table his kindly, pink face grinned at Swanson.

"Ain't seen yuh around the house lately," he said speculatively. "You an' Bernetta ain't had no scrap, eh?"

"No, sir," Swanson replied slowly no accent to his speech now. "I've—I've been mighty busy."

"Going to be there for supper?" Helms went on, for Swanson's "dressing up" showed he intended going calling some where. There could be only one place, for Swanson hadn't looked at another girl.

"If Miss Bernetta don't mind."

"I reckon she don't!" Helms laughed. That sent a tinge of red up over Swanson's clean-shaven cheeks.

Swanson turned out of the office, left the store and walked up a side street to a plain, small white house. Here he slowed down, becoming almost too embarrassed to venture up the yard walk. The comely Bernetta spotted him from the living room. She opened the front door, smiling warmly, her heart-shaped mouth opening in greeting.

"Howdy, stranger!"

"Howdy, ma'm," he replied removing his hat. "I've come calling, if yuh don't mind."

"You're staying for supper," she retorted, taking the hat from his big, hard fingers.

He went into the living room and sat listening to her talk until time to light the lamps. Mrs. Helms stuck her head through the door once to smile at him. Bernetta went to help her finish cooking supper, and Helms himself appeared at last.

"Figured I'd find yuh here," he chortled, but grew serious. "Too bad there's no clues leadin' to this cussed Banty Bill Dade!"

"Yes, sure," Swanson got out.

ALL during supper he sat in silence, preferring to have the family carry on the conversation. Afterwards he remained in the living room for more than an hour with Bernetta. When he got ready to leave, her slender fingers touched his left arm.

"Ole," she never called him Swede, "I think you're worrying too much over Devar Rhodes' murder. You're getting entirely too gloomy about it."

He hesitated.

"It's because I can't do anything," he got out finally. "That bothers me. Mister Rhodes was same to me as a father. It ain't right this scrawny outlaw should get away with such a crime."

"I know," she patted his arm affec-

tionately, and with understanding, "but Sheriff Mikesell is doing everything possible to catch him. If anybody can, he will, Ole."

"Yes, sure."

The very next morning Swede turned from the forge to see Keiss dismount from his black horse and bring in a dark red bay led by a halter.

"Look here, Swede," Keiss began in a domineering voice. "I want my spare horse shod new all around. Do so with no delay, savvy?"

"Yah," Swanson kept on turning the handle of the forge pump to heat the iron he had in the coke fire.

"I mean drop whatever else yuh got an' go to work on him!" Keiss snapped. "I want this here horse ready for me when I come back from up town."

Considering Keiss, Swanson's gaze dropped from the slightly angry man of questionable repute to the knees of the bay. There were marks above the hoofs of the forelegs, and on the knees. Swanson's eyes shot beyond to the black, observing the same marks.

"Pay attention to what I'm tellin' yuh!" Keiss shouted.

"Yah, sure," Swanson said mechanically, jerking his gaze back to him. Keiss was on edge about something, more mean and hateful than usual.

"Yuh gonna shoe this horse?"

"Yah, sure."

"Then get to work." He dropped the lead rope, walking back to his horse in the shop entrance. In the saddle he made one more crack, "Mind what I said, now. I want this job done fast!"

Swanson didn't bother answering. He stepped over as Keiss left, picking up the forelegs of the bay. The marks were partly healed, being mostly small elongated spots where the hair had been rubbed off by sudden, sharp friction. He examined the feet next, observing that shoes had recently been pulled from all four feet.

Men who got their horses shod by him didn't usually do that. These shoes had been pulled off two or three days before. Why? Swanson could think only because the rider of this horse didn't want the bay's tracks identified. Both reasons meant a man hiding out. Swanson didn't believe Keiss' statement that this was his spare horse. He certainly hadn't been seen with the animal before.

Between the bay and the tilted kegs on the wall containing assorted sized horseshoes he hesitated. Then he turned part way back to consider those foreleg marks anew. A slow light began to dawn. They could have been made in only one way. Spills while riding over slick rocks, or up a very rocky canyon trail. They had been made against rock. To be certain of it Swanson went back, examining some of the worst places where the skin had been scratched and since scabbed over. In one such small injury he found rock dust under a scab.

That settled it. He went automatically to a keg of shoes and picked out four. While putting them in the forge his head puzzled into a very deep study. Should he go to Sheriff Mikesell, and if he did what could he tell him? Actually he owned no proof about anything. If he voiced suspicions it would simply put Banty Bill Dade wise. It wouldn't catch him. Provided of course, his theories were correct, that the bay was the outlaw's mount.

Swanson became more than usually industrious despite the fact he had always been pretty fast in turning out a piece of work. He pared each hoof down to exactness, and then measured each shoe in turn for precise shaping. Swanson was always careful, and he was an expert horseshoer. But Keiss might return before he finished. For that reason he shod both hind feet first. Not that there was obviously anything wrong with his work. Indeed, he took considerable pains over the small matter, heating them again and again, watching the cherry red glow of the iron with eyes almost lidded over—and a final white-hot heat after they were shaped.

A DOUSE into the water barrel cooled the shoes. He nailed them on, rasped them with great care, and satisfied with the job he turned to the forefeet. Keiss did arrive before he completed the shoeing. Swanson looked around to see him dismount in front, a sack of grub tied behind the saddle. He kept right on driving thin nails.

"Yuh ain't done yet?" Keiss grumbled

between his teeth. "I told yuh to shoe the bay fast, you thick headed Swede!"

"Yah, yuh want hoorse to walk off them shoes, yah?"

"Oh, all right," Keiss flared, but not raging so much. "So long as yuh do the work right. I'm in a hurry is all!"

"Yah."

Swanson finished nailing the shoes, turned and clinched the nails. He stood up, sweat beading dust on his torso, and inclined his head.

Keiss picked up the halter rope, walking back to his own horse. He went into the saddle and rode out of the shop entrance. Swanson came along behind him, to stand in the door staring. Keiss hadn't paid for the work.

He seemed to remember it a hundred feet away. Keiss turned his head.

"You can charge it to the dust, an' let the rain settle it!" he called.

Swanson only said, "Yah," and remained watching. Keiss rode south from town. But within a few minutes he turned west, and was soon out of sight, in a circle back towards the north. There would be a reason for that too. He didn't want to be seen leaving Blackwater in the real direction he wanted to go.

His brow puckering in wrinkles, Swanson remained motionless all of two minutes longer. Keiss was riding out. He wasn't coming back to town. Not for a long time at least. Which was why the gun packing, overbearing man intended to beat him out of the price of his work. It was then a slow grin marked his homely face.

Retiring part way inside the shop, Swanson doffed his leather apron. He put on a blue work shirt and left the shop, and walked up the east side to Helms' store. Sheriff Mikesell and Helms were at their game in the office when Swanson walked in.

"I've been thinking," he began. "I know one place where maybe nobody has thought to look for Banty Bill Dade."

"Naw!" Sheriff Mikesell exclaimed, moving around in his chair. "Swede, I'll swear if I ain't either looked myself, or had my deputies to, into every last cussed hole a foot deep or behind every prairie dog hill for fifty miles around Blackwater!"

"Yuh ride as far as Glass Mountain at the head of Rustler Canyon?"

Sheriff Mikesell's eyes narrowed. Glass Mountain was a solid chunk of volcanic obsidian from the rim-rock at the head of a small defile known as Rustler Canyon. In the early days a band of rustlers had worked out of there. That had been long before the country settled up. Glass Mountain was in thickly populated range, a most unlikely place for a wanted man to hide. It was out where everybody could see it—yet Sheriff Mikesell got up out of his chair.

"Gimme, Swede," he drawled, his eyes beginning to shine. "You hear plenty in your shop. Go on!"

Swanson's face took on an expression of worried doubt.

"I only got this," he decided to talk sparingly. "Keiss left Blackwater headed south. He swung around towards Glass Mountain country in the north. How come? I shod a bay horse he claimed was his spare mount. Never seen him ride any but the black."

"The rider seen with Banty Bill Dade forked a black!"

"Keiss' horse, and the one I shod had foreleg marks like they'd been sliding on rock, Sheriff. Hair cut off, hide scratched."

Helms said tightly, "Oh, oh!" and Swanson turned out of the office. It was in the hands of the law now. Maybe his theory would pan out. Back at the shop he found a farmer with a team of Percherons waiting for special heavy calked shoes. More work arrived hourly, too, and Swanson sweated and pounded iron. He was not too busy though to keep an eye on the business section of the town. His shop was on the lower edge and facing the street, and an occasional stroll to the open front gave him a view of whatever went on.

As the day wore on and nothing happened Swede began to lose enthusiasm. But towards dusk Sheriff Mikesell took two men out of town. Swanson felt better.

HE WORKED late, by lantern light, as a slow mounting apprehension seethed in him. Finally, tired out, he repaired to his bachelor quarters, cooked,

washed up and ate. He went to bed, dropping off immediately to sleep. With the dawn he came awake still anxious. This day should reveal something one way or the other.

A cowman he knew sent in four head of horses to be shod. After that he worked on a wagon and some farm tools. No riders came into town from the north until midday. His customers, waiting around, were up-town eating when Sheriff Mikesell rode up to the shop. He dismounted tiredly, and came over to Swanson standing beside the anvil.

"You was right to the dot!" he exclaimed. "Swede, we found Banty Bill Dade up there, so help me!"

Swanson began to glow, while he waited for more.

"He had a camp right on the top of Glass Mountain," Sheriff Mikesell went on. "At some pot holes where there was water. Got up in there over a slick trail off the canyon. We jumped him from the east side. A rider got out ahead of us. Spooky, that galoot, an' we never did come up with him."

When he paused Swanson asked, "Banty Bill Dade!"

"Dead!"

"Dead?"

"As dead as a man can be! It's odd how that happened too, Swede. We jumped them, though they heard us in time to throw saddles on their horses. Dade went out of there last, on the run. We took in after him, over the bulge of Glass Mountain, an' down a narrow steep trail into Rustler Canyon. Come to a fast bend on the run an' Banty Bill Dade didn't make it. Him an' his horse went over to the bottom of the canyon."

Swanson's face wreathed in a grin until he remembered the horse. He didn't like that part of it.

"I'm sorry about the horse," he said.

"Didn't kill the critter," Sheriff Mikesell replied. "Hurt a bit but the animal will live. Swede, something curious about them new shoes on the bay. They'd broke plumb into pieces. Surprising for any shoes you put on. Look," he fished out a piece of iron.

Taking it Swanson made wide-eyed pretense of examining it critically.

"Them shoes was burned so there wasn't no strength left in the iron," Sheriff Mikesell declared quietly. "Soon as Dade hit a high lope on that hard obsidian they broke quick."

"Yes, guess that's what happened," Swanson agreed.

"You guess?" Sheriff Mikesell laughed. "You kind of liked old Devar Rhodes, didn't yuh, Swede?"

Swanson's face went somber on the instant. "He was like father to me."

"Well, yuh guessed right, but supposing that had been somebody else's horse?"

"For Mister Rhodes I needed to take a chance I was right," Swanson answered gently. "A risk I had to run. I mean I couldn't do it no other way."

"Panned out, Swede. You got my admiration. A blacksmith sure sent outlaw Banty Bill Dade to boothill!"

After Sheriff Mikesell was gone the day grew brighter for Swanson. Now he sang an occasional snatch of song while he worked. His customers returned to go homeward full of the exciting news of the end of the infamous outlaw.

Swanson had only one piece of work to finish up for the day, a hay lift for a cowman getting ready to stack his winter supply. He measured pieces of iron, cut them, made holes and shaped them on the anvil with a five-pound hammer. He thought he would knock off early, and go calling on Bernetta.

He was shaping a two-foot length of iron into a tine for the hay lift when Keiss rode into the shop. He came all the way in, getting his horse under cover, and hit the ground with both feet. His face glared murderously at Swanson.

AFTER one look Swanson returned to pounding the glowing end of the tine with the hammer. He sensed what this would be. Keiss came to a halt, left hand hooked over his cartridge belt and the other on the handle of his gun.

"So you're the cuss who sent my pardner, Banty Bill to his death!" he got out, low and hard. "Quit that hammering, blast it!"

Swanson's right arm flexed and paused, the hammer held in the air over the dying red of the iron.

"Yah?" He blinked his eyes once.

"Don't try to deny it!" Keiss cried

hotly. "It's all over the country how smart yuh fixed them shoes."

"Yah?" Swanson swallowed once, wondering how he would be able to turn the tables on Keiss who would surely start shooting in another moment. "You vas the one who ran away with him ven Mister Rhodes was kilt, ay bane figure?"

"Yuh figger right!" Keiss hurled back. "For all the good it's going to do yuh, I've been teamed up with him all the while."

"Buying grub for him too, yah?"

"Yah," Keiss mimicked. "An' whiskey too, yah!"

"Mister Rhodes was a very nice man."

"So that's yore play, eh? Reason yuh took a hand. Okay, Swede, try swallowin' these hunks of lead an' die saying 'yah'!" He started lifting his gun clear of leather. Swanson wasn't armed. Keiss didn't faintly imagine there could be much danger from the tow-headed blacksmith.

What he met with lightning suddenness came in a blinding flash of pain and stars as the flat headed, five pound hammer struck his jaw. Swanson wheeled all the way around then, dropping the tongs from his left hand. The tine rattled off the anvil to the dirt floor of the shop.

There was no need for a second blow. Swanson stood breathing hard a moment over the sprawled body. The one side swipe had been damaging. Keiss had a broken jaw and a big gap in his teeth where the blood was leaking out of his mouth. He was going to be unconscious for a long, long time.

Swanson placed the hammer on the anvil. He walked slowly to the front of the shop and looked up the street.

Sheriff Mikesell came running up, gasping for breath. Far up above several cowboys were yanking horses away from tie rails and mounting, heading down the street.

"Somebody told me they see Keiss ride in here, so I came as fast as I could," Sheriff Mikesell managed. "I'm sure he was the one escaped us at Glass Mountain."

"Yah," said Swanson, forgetting he wasn't mad or disturbed any more. "I mean yeah," he added hastily.

"What do you mean, yeah?" Sheriff Mikesell wanted to know.

The riders were reining to a curious stop behind the sheriff. There weren't any fireworks so they thought the report must have been a mistake. Swanson turned inside the building.

Sheriff Mikesell came in behind him, spotting the black horse first, and finally Keiss crumpled up near the anvil. He rushed forward and bent down beside the body.

"He's alive, I reckon," he announced standing up. The dismounted cowboys were piling into the shop.

"He'll live, I expect. Didn't hit him solid with the hammer."

"Shucks, yuh cleaned up the last of them!"

"Well, yuh got one to try in court, ain't you?" Swanson grinned easily.

He was only thinking Sheriff Mikesell could close the case now. Devar Rhodes was avenged. Tonight would be a good chance to ask Bernetta the question he'd been wanting to ask her for quite awhile.

If you enjoyed "Boothill Blacksmith," by Gladwell Richardson, you will also be interested in HUNGRY RIVER GUNS, an exciting complete book-length novel of range war by the same author which appears in the January issue of our companion magazine WEST — now on sale, 15c at all stands!

Knife in one hand and rifle in the other, Joel whirled as he reached the wagon train

CRIMSON SIESTA

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Trapped and framed by Bandit Don Roberto, Joel Cardway girds himself for a gun-roaring finish fight against desperate odds!

CHAPTER I

Cold Reception

ABOUT an hour before the usual siesta time, Joel Cardway urged his jaded pony down the slope and into the little village of Vista Grande.

He had traveled through the heat of the day in his eagerness to reach his destination. The trail had been deep with velvety dust. Not a breath of breeze stirred. A relentless sun radiated from the rocks to form heat waves that danced across the land. The distant lofty peaks were crowned with white turbans of snow as if in mockery.

Joel Cardway straightened in his saddle and mopped the perspiration from his face, throat and hands with a neckcloth already sodden. In this heat, his buckskin clothes were a torture. He thrust his coonskin cap far back on his head, exposing a mass of unkempt sandy hair. One hand fumbled at the sheath

An Action Novelet

attached to his wide leather belt as he made sure his long knife was there. He also had a musket in a saddle boot.

He squinted against the glare of the sun and made a swift inspection of the village as he approached it. It consisted of a few adobe huts clustered around a sprawling cantina building.

Peopling the place were Spaniards, Mexicans, Indians, half-breeds and a few renegade Americans engaged in smuggling and robbery along the Santa Fe Trail. Joel knew Vista Grande well, for he was a Trail guide and guard, and the Trail ran through the village on its way to Taos and Santa Fe.

As he neared the village, he began noticing unusual things. Women were not waddling among the huts nor half naked children playing around them. Few men sat in the shade in front of Pedro Perez' cantina. No horses were at the hitch rails, and only a couple in the ramshackle public corral.

Keenly alert, Joel urged his pony on, to stop him at the watering trough fed by a spring. As the pony drank, Joel dismounted to drink also. His eyes swept over the village again. There was something out of the usual, something he felt but could not explain to himself.

Everyone in the village must have seen his descent of the slope and be aware of his approach. But they did not gather in front of the cantina to ask for news, as they generally did when a rider came off the Trail.

JOEL had been hoping that Lolita Perez, the cantina keeper's niece, would emerge from the front door to greet him with smiling pretended surprise. He had ridden through the heat to hasten the moment of meeting her again. But the girl did not appear.

Perhaps, Joel thought, she had delayed to put on her best dress, and possibly decorate her black hair with a red rose from the vine that grew on the patio wall. It had been four months since he had seen her, and when they had parted last there had seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them.

"I must go back to Missouri with this wagon train," Joel had told her then. "Got some business there. My uncle has died and left me property. I'll get back here as soon as I can, and then we can settle things."

She had murmured something about watching and waiting for him. And now he was back and riding into the village, and she was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she was taking her siesta earlier than usual, he thought.

He mounted, gathered the reins and turned the pony away from the watering trough. In the shade in front of the cantina, he got out of the saddle again and tied the pony. He raised his long arms high and stretched. His tall, lean body ached with saddle weariness.

Joel was hungry, and also glad it was almost siesta time, for he was dead tired and wanted an hour or so of sleep. He glanced at the men in front of the cantina—two stolid half-breeds, whose conversation was limited to guttural exclamations, and a stranger obviously American.

Joel nodded to them politely as he started toward the doorway of the cantina. The two breeds simply ignored his presence, and the strange American seemed to regard him with suspicion and hostility. Joel passed them and strode into the cantina's main room.

Plans had formed in his mind. He would see Lolita as soon as he could, tell her about the farm he had inherited in distant Missouri, and ask her to marry him at once and go there with him to make her home. She was only a burden on her uncle here in Vista Grande, and had no future unless she wished to go to Santa Fe and be a common cantina girl to be pawed by all sorts of men.

Joel's old friend, Adam Foxglove, wagon train boss, was about due in Vista Grande on an eastward trip. Joel had decided that he and Lolita would travel with Adam Foxglove's train, be married at Bent's Fort, then go on to Independence and thence to their new home.

The main room of the cantina was large and gloomy. Joel blinked to rid his eyes of sun glare and glanced around swiftly. Swarthy, obese Pedro Perez stood behind the small bar. Tables were scattered around the room, but only two men were sitting at them now. One was Clyde Brater, an arrogant halfbreed

Joel knew by sight, and the other a Mexican he never had seen before.

Drawing off his buckskin riding gauntlets, Joel strode to the bar. It was the custom of Pedro Perez to greet a man off the Trail with a wide smile and a jovial manner and make him feel at home. But he looked blankly at Joel, then scowled slightly.

"Howdy, Perez!" Joel greeted. "It's good to get inside and out of that broiling sun. I'm about starved, so yell for your wife to cook me up a mess. Gimme a drink. I want a room on the patio, too, and I'll put my pony in the corral."

Joel tossed a coin upon the bar as he finished speaking, and got out his pipe and tobacco pouch. Without answering, Perez waddled along the bar and put bottle and glass in front of Joel.

"What are you so glum about?" Joel asked. "And where is everybody? The town looks deserted. What's the news hereabouts? Have you heard when Adam Foxglove's wagon train is due? Has Don Roberto, the bandit, been acting up while I've been gone?"

Joel was pouring his drink as he spoke. Now he glanced up to find that Perez had moved a few feet away from him and was pretending to wipe off the bar.

QUICKLY Joel tossed off the drink and moved along the bar also, starting to stuff tobacco in the bowl of his pipe.

"What's troubling you, Perez?" he asked. "Can't you answer a man's straight questions? Yell to your wife to cook me a meal."

"She takes her siesta now, señor," Perez informed him.

"After the siesta, then. I'm tired myself. Give me a room, so I can get an hour's sleep."

"All the rooms are engaged, señor."

"What? I never knew that to happen before, unless a wagon train was stopping here overnight."

"Engaged and paid for in advance, señor. Perhaps the people may arrive at any moment."

Joel's eyes narrowed and glittered. Perez' manner was frankly insolent. "Where can I sleep?" he asked.

"There are two vacant huts beside the corral, and you may use either of them Señor Cardway."

"What's this?" Señor Cardway, huh It used to be Señor Joel. What's going on around here? What have you heard of Adam Foxglove's wagon train?"

"A rider who passed through said the train left Santa Fe some time ago—that is all I know."

"Has Don Roberto been around lately?"

"A cautious man does not speak too much regarding the comings and goings of Don Roberto, señor."

"And why not?" Joel demanded. "It's no secret that he's a boss bandit. Some of his gang hang out right here in Vista Grande. Whenever there's a chase, he takes to the hills and nobody can find him." He lowered his voice. "Where's Lolita? I'm right eager to see her again."

Pedro Perez lifted his head and looked Joel straight in the eyes.

"Lolita is in her room, señor," he replied. "I am quite sure she does not wish to see you. And the man she is about to marry would not like it, señor."

CHAPTER II

Unexpected Trouble

IT WAS like an unexpected slap in the face. Joel's eyes bulged and his lower jaw sagged in an expression of speechless astonishment.

"The—the man she is about to marry?" Joel stammered. "What do you mean?"

Perez lifted his head like a proud man. "I mean what I say," he replied. "Lolita, my niece, is to marry Don Roberto. The marriage will be held within a few days."

"Are you mad?" Joel demanded. "You would let a girl like Lolita marry a bandit, a man who rides the hills, whose end will be a bullet or the rope? Why?"

"Don Roberto—"

"Oh, stop calling him that!" Joel interrupted. "He's not a Don, and his name probably isn't Roberto."

"But that is the way he is called, señor," Perez persisted. "He is a man

of wealth and position and can give our little Lolita a splendid home. They may travel to Mexico City after Don Roberto concludes a certain piece of business.'

"Certain piece of business? You probably mean some robbery he has planned. Perez, you know that I've been planning to marry Lolita. She's been waiting for me to come back, and here I am. I've inherited a rich farm on the bank of the Missouri. I'm here to marry her."

"You are too late, señor."

"You mean to stand there and tell me that Lolita loves a murdering thief like this Don Roberto?"

"If she does not love him now, she will soon learn to love him, señor. Don Roberto and I have arranged this marriage, and I am satisfied."

"How much did he have to pay to satisfy you?" Joel asked.

"Señor!" Perez' eyes flamed.

"Or, maybe he's holding something over your head," Joel continued. "You let me see Lolita and have a talk with her, and I'll soon get to the truth of this."

"But such a thing is impossible, señor, without permission from Don Roberto, and he is not here at present, though he is expected. Take my advice, Señor Cardway, and do as I say."

"And what's that?"

"Go to one of the vacant huts and have your siesta. A meal will be ready for you after you have rested. Then ride back east to the next village and wait there for Señor Foxglove's wagon train, and travel with it to your distant Missouri—and never return."

"Suppose I don't do all that?"

"If you do not, señor, you may encounter difficulties," Perez observed.

"You're not scaring me much, Perez. I'm going to see Lolita and talk to her and find out about this. You won't marry her against her wish to a murdering, thieving swine who may be strung up any day or shot out of his saddle!"

A moment before, Joel had realized that the strange American who had been sitting out in front of the cantina had entered and was standing at the head of the bar puffing a pungent Mexican cheroot. Joel sensed a movement now, and turned quickly to see the stranger moving toward him.

"Who are you callin' a murderin', thievin' swine?" the stranger asked, angrily.

"Not you, whoever you are," Joel replied. "I'm having a private conversation with Señor Perez—"

"My name's Sam Detlan," the other man broke in. "And I've been told that you're Joel Cardway. You've got quite a reputation, I understand, for bein' a guide, guard and fighter. You don't look like much of anything to me."

It was obvious to Joel that this Sam Detlan was trying to pick a quarrel, possibly had been stationed at the cantina to do that very thing. Joel put his back against the bar, dropped his hand to his knife, and glanced around the room swiftly.

CLYDE BRATER, the halfbreed, was sitting at one of the tables and smiling slightly as he handled a pack of greasy playing cards. The Mexican at another table seemed to be half asleep. Joel knew that Brater was suspected of being Don Roberto's right hand man.

He turned his head to see that Sam Detlan had stepped nearer and was standing out from the bar, bending forward slightly and balancing his body on the balls of his feet. A knife fighter ready for a battle!

"Sam Detlan, as you call yourself, why don't you let Don Roberto fight his own battles?" Joel asked. "You're on his pay list, huh?"

Sam Detlan moved with lightning speed. His body swayed slightly to one side. His right hand darted to his belt, and Joel caught the flash of light on the blade of the knife. As Joel sidestepped swiftly, the knife flashed over his shoulder to strike the wall behind him. And Detlan, Joel saw as he surged forward, had a second knife in his hand.

If he threw that knife and missed, he would be disarmed and at Joel's mercy, so Joel sensed he would not throw it. In an instant, Joel was upon him, his own knife out of its sheath. The two blades met and their hilts locked, and the two men strained to disengage to advantage.

As they twisted and turned, Joel saw Clyde Brater watching the fight but not

moving from the bench upon which he sat, and he still fumbled the greasy cards. The Mexican was wide awake now and watching also, but not preparing to interfere. Behind his bar, Pedro Perez was jabbering something Joel could not understand.

Detlan swung aside, disengaged his knife and struck, and the blade grazed the sleeve of Joel's buckskin coat. Their arms went up together, bodies came forward to crash, the knives locked at the hilts, and again the two men strained.

The two breeds who had been sitting in front of the cantina were standing in the doorway now, watching and shouting. Joel could hear the sound of running feet. He whirled aside, but Detlan kept with him.

Then Joel disengaged and struck. His blade brought blood from Detlan's shoulder. Detlan howled a curse and charged forward to strike and miss. As he turned, Joel gripped the man's left arm with his own left hand and whirled him half way around.

Fear flashed into Detlan's face as he found himself off balance. He took another small cut on his right forearm to twist free and retreat.

"Want to fight, do you?" Joel shouted at him angrily. "Trying to earn a few pesos from Don Roberto? Tell him to send a better man the next time. Come and get me, or I'll come for you!"

Men were rushing into the cantina from outside. And suddenly a heavy set, swarthy man came hurrying in from the patio. Joel had seen the bandit, Don Roberto, before and now recognized him instantly.

"Stop it!" the bandit chief shouted. "Brater! Help me stop it! Grab Detlan and hold him!"

Clyde Brater left the table with a rush and seized Detlan from behind, an act for which Detlan seemed thankful. Don Roberto got between Joel and Detlan quickly.

"Stop it!" the bandit shouted. "Put up your knives!"

Brater had torn Detlan's knife from his grasp and tossed it upon the floor. Joel stepped back to the bar, still holding his own knife ready.

"You saved your man's life, Don Roberto," he said. "The next time, either do your own fighting or send a better man to get me. I'd have ripped this one open in a moment more."

"I do not relish your words, señor," the bandit chieftain replied.

"I don't care a hoot whether you do or not. You—Sam Detlan! Stay out of my way after this! Get near me again, and we'll make a finish of it."

DON ROBERTO lifted his hand in a command for silence.

"One moment, Señor Cardway! I have admired you for some time. As a trail guide and fighter, you have my respect and admiration. I overheard what you said concerning me, and forgive you for it, because I understand how you could have become enraged at the news Perez gave you. Let us have an end of this trouble."

Brater had compelled Sam Detlan to leave the cantina, and now returned to stand beside Don Roberto, the slight smile still upon his lips. Joel knew the breed's real nature, for men up and down the Trail spoke of his cruelties and his lack of mercy at all times.

"Do I have to fight you now, Brater?" Joel asked him. "How many more men have you hired to try to get me, Don Roberto? Are you so afraid of me that you want me killed?"

Don Roberto's face purpled with wrath, but he fought successfully to control himself.

"Señor Cardway, you are just off the Trail, and undoubtedly are tired," the bandit replied. "Also, you are enraged about a certain matter. Let us discuss this affair after you are rested, and when both of us are calm. I do not seek to take advantage of you."

'Thats' noble of you," Joel replied, sarcastically.

"Perez, have one of your Indians turn Señor Cardway's horse into the corral," the bandit ordered. "Let him go to one of the huts to sleep, and have a hot meal ready for him when his siesta is over. After he has eaten, we'll talk. And serve us drinks now to soothe our nerves."

Joel glanced at him sharply. The bandit chief's face was like a mask. Brater already was stepping up to the bar. Joel returned his knife to its sheath

and went to the bar with Don Roberto.

"I don't know as I want to drink with wou," Joel told the bandit.

"I ask you to drink with me a silent toast to a certain person," Don Roberto replied, with meaning. "It is not necessary to mention a name. Surely, you cannot refuse to do that."

It was Lolita he meant, of course. Joel nodded and poured a drink from the bottle Perez put on the bar before him. Clyde Brater already had poured a drink from another bottle, and now he passed it to Don Roberto, who poured in his turn. They all raised their glasses and drank.

Joel got his musket and blanketroll off his saddle before one of Perez' Indians led the pony toward the corral. He stumbled through the heat toward one of the two vacant huts. There was little choice between them. Joel selected one, yawned, began undoing his blanketroll.

He glanced through the open doorway at the blazing sun. None of the others had followed him from the cantina. The Indian unsaddled the pony and turned him into the corral, then bent over and dogtrotted toward the strip of shade in front of the cantina building.

Despite the heat, Joel closed the door of the hut and put in front of it a couple of empty kegs he found inside, one balanced delicately on top of the other; if anybody opened the door, the kegs would tumble down and awaken him.

He spread his blankets in a corner where nobody could use gun or knife through the hut's one window and hit him. Then he dropped upon the blankets and took off his coat and loosened his shirt. He was wearing boots instead of moccasins, but did not remove them.

He did not take off his wide belt either, and the hilt of the knife was near his hand as he stretched out on the blankets. He had propped his musket against the wall in the corner. He completed his arrangements for sleep as if in a fog. He was so tired and sleepy and hot that unconsciousness descended upon him with the speed of a tropical night falling upon the jungle.

Afterward, he remembered that he had seemed to be tortured by a horrible nightmare, and once he thought he heard a woman scream. Then came a period of black sleep.

And then there was a chorus of strident yells, a sense of intense excitement, the consciousness of the presence of several men around him. And finally he distinguished the hoarse voice of Don Roberto:

"Bring water and throw it upon his head! Awaken the drunken, murdering brute!"

CHAPTER III

Bandit Trap

JOEL did not realize that Don Roberto was speaking of him. He realized nothing at first except that his head ached and throbbed, that he was nauseated and had a strange bitter taste in his mouth.

As fuller consciousness returned to him, he recognized what his condition meant. The headache, nausea and the bitter taste—he had experienced them once several years before in a cantina at Santa Fe. He knew, then, that he had been given drink which had been drugged by a concoction the Indians brewed from certain roots and leaves.

Water cascaded upon his head and half choked him. He coughed, turned half way over, opened his eyes partially. It was all coming back to him now.

The door of the hut was standing open, and the kegs had been tumbled to one side. The hut was filled with men. Joel could make out Don Roberto, Clyde Brater, Perez. As some of them moved aside, Joel could see through the doorway, and the first thing he saw was the orange and scarlet sunset.

Then he was certain he had been drugged. He would not have slept this long normally. His hand strayed toward his knife—but the sheath was empty. A swift glance told him his musket had been taken from the corner.

"Get on your feet, you cheap murderin' polecat!" Clyde Brater yelled at him.

Nobody jerked him to his feet or helped him. He closed his eyes and braced himself against the wall of the

hut and finally managed to stand. Everything reeled before him when he opened his eyes again. He fought off the nausea, and presently could see distinctly.

"What's happened?" he muttered.

"So you're pretendin' you don't know?" Brater said. "You couldn't let your quarrel with Sam Detlan end, huh? You waited until he was asleep in the other hut, then slipped over and knifed him, and came back here and went to sleep like an innocent baby."

"What are you talking about?" Joel asked, his mind groping for the facts.

Don Roberto thrust his way forward. "He is talking about how you murdered Señor Detlan while he slept," he declared. "I had thought you a brave man, but now I know you for a coward. Because you had a little trouble with him, fought with him with neither of you being badly hurt, you could not drop the quarrel as we all understood both you and Detlan would. So you waited, señor, until Sam Detlan was asleep, went to the other hut and stabbed him, then returned here. One of the Indians found the body."

"It's a lie!" Joel yelled. "I came straight to this hut from the cantina, and haven't left it since. I never killed anybody."

"And you were not even clever, señor," Don Roberto told him. "We found your knife beside you, the blade covered with blood. There is blood upon your hands and clothing."

Joel looked at his hands and the front of his shirt, and saw the incriminating blood. He braced himself against the wall in the corner and faced them like a wild beast at bay.

"I killed nobody!" he cried. "It has been made to look so. I haven't been out of this hut. I was drugged by that drink in the cantina—"

"Do not try falsehood, señor," the bandit chief interrupted. "You fought with Sam Detlan. When the fight was stopped, you threatened him and several men heard you. He has been stabbed to death, and we found your bloody knife beside you, and blood on your shirt and boots. To kill a man in fair fight is one thing, Señor Cardway, but to stab him to death while he is asleep and helpess is quite another."

"It's a pack of lies!" Joel yelled at him. "You've fixed up this thing, Roberto. You and Clyde Brater. It's one of your cute little tricks."

DON ROBERTO gestured suddenly, and those in the hut backed toward the door.

"But for me, Señor Cardway, the men of the village would have hanged you instantly," the bandit chief said. "I have made them agree to wait until tomorrow. Perez will send you food and a jug of wine a little later. You cannot get through the window of the hut, and we will fasten the door on the outside. You will remain here a prisoner, señor, through the night."

Don Roberto's lips twisted a little as he backed through the doorway. The door was closed instantly, and Joel heard a bar being put across it outside. The bandit chief was giving orders for one of his men to remain as guard.

Joel lurched across the small room to the window and looked out. They were marching toward the cantina, all except the man chosen as guard and Don Roberto. Joel looked after them. He thought he saw the white face of Lolita for an instant at one of the patio windows.

Joel's mind was clearing rapidly now. He realized his predicament fully. He was certain that Don Roberton had engineered this affair.

If Sam Detlan really was dead, Don Roberto had contrived to have him slain and the blame put on Joel. No doubt he had arranged with Perez to drug Joel so he would be unconscious while the crime was being committed and the false evidence built up.

Joel wondered why Don Roberto had gone to all that trouble. Why had he not merely had one of his bandits use a knife on Joel while he was drugged?

And why, since things had been carried out as they had, did Don Roberto not let him be strung up to the nearest tree, if he desired the death of his rival and the man who had called him a murdering thief?

Joel saw Don Roberto speak to the guard and the man stroll over toward the corral as if in answer to orders. Then the bandit chief approached the

open window through which Joel was peering. Don Roberto's eyes were glittering malevolently now, and he showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. The mask had fallen.

"So, Señor Cardway!" he said in low, tense tones. "Here you find yourself in a sad predicament. No doubt you have guessed a part of it. I knew you were coming along the Trail from the east, and knew the reason for your haste. But I had already arranged with Perez to marry his niece, though I knew she had a fond feeling for you."

"And still has!" Joel said, defiantly.

"She will not retain that feeling, señor, when she believes you guilty of a cowardly murder and sees your dead body swinging from the end of a rope. If she does still retain it, señor, I promise to beat it out of her."

"It's a lucky thing for you that I can't get at you right now," Joel told him. "I'd kill you with my bare hands!"

"You'll do no more killing, señor. As I was saying, I knew you were coming to Vista Grande, and engaged Sam Detlan, who fancied himself a champion knife fighter, to pick a quarrel with you and finish you. I watched the fight, and was disgusted at the poor showing he made, so I had it stopped. No man who fails me, señor, lives for long. So I had the bright idea—why not dispose of two nuisances at once?"

"What was the bright idea?" Joel asked.

"Drug you, kill Detlan as he slept and put the blame for his death on you, and hang you for the crime and so wipe all affection for you out of a certain señorita's heart. Was it not a pretty plot?"

"There are some who will discover the truth."

"Several already know the truth, señor, but they will tell the story as I order them to tell it."

"And why wait until tomorrow to finish me?" Joel asked.

THE bandit shrugged and smiled evilly.

"There are two reasons for that, Señor Cardway. One is that I wish you to suffer for hours from the knowledge that an ignoble violent death for you is inevitable. Perhaps you will wonder, señor, how the rope will feel around your neck, how you will suffer when you commence strangling, what you will encounter when life finally leaves your body. That is the first reason."

"And what's the other?" Joel asked.

"I and some of my friends must ride immediately and join some others, to engage in a certain enterprise which will result in both profit and revenge for me. I cannot delay the enterprise."

"Going on a raid, are you?"

"That is true, señor. You have guessed it. The greatest affair of my career so far. An Americano wagon train is approaching from Santa Fe. I happen to know that it carries a fortune in silversmiths' work that has been freighted up from Mexico, and also a quantity of gold and silver in payment for goods delivered in Santa Fe."

"A train like that will be well guarded."

"No doubt, señor. But an ambush has been arranged, and for this work I have engaged more men than usual. We will surprise the wagon train in a certain spot, kill the men with it, loot the wagons and burn them, and start the loot toward Mexico along a secret route we have devised. I shall return to Vista Grande with a few friends to claim my bride, then overtake the others and journey on to Mexico and live like a king."

"Maybe your men will get away with the loot while you're back here," Joel hinted.

"Ah, no señor! Clyde Brater will be in charge, and he is a man I can trust. It is all arranged. When I come for my bride, I'll have the pleasure of watching you strangle to death at the end of a rope."

"You said profit and revenge," Joel reminded him.

"I have explained to you the profit in the enterprise. As to the revenge, the wagon train boss in charge often has referred to me as a murderer, thief, coward, highwayman, outlaw and other like terms. I'll remind him of it when we hang him, if he doesn't get shot during the fighting. His name is Adam Foxglove."

"Adam!" Joel cried. "He's one of the

finest men in the world. He saved my life once."

"Ah! If you are friends, you will have the pleasure of each other's presence in the life hereafter, and not be long separated," Don Roberto, replied, chuckling.

"You think you can keep me here like a rat in a trap while my friend is in danger, and come back and make me stretch rope whenever you feel like it?"

"Precisely, señor. You have stated the situation with admirable clearness," Don Roberto praised.

He laughed and turned away from the window, called to the guard, and strode off toward the cantina as the guard hurried to the hut to take up his post.

CHAPTER IV

Flames of Release

PRUDENTLY, Joel made no attempt then to speak to the guard. He had recognized the man as a murderous halfbreed everybody knew was a member of Don Roberto's band of outlaws. The dusk came as Joel paced around the small hut, trying to get his mind entirely clear so it could grapple with the problem confronting him.

From the cantina came two men, one carrying a torch and an olla filled with water. The second had a large tray and a smaller olla containing wine. They spoke to the guard, then approached the window and called to Joel.

"Here is food and drink for you, cowardly murdering Americano!" one of the men announced. "I also have a candle for you, which I shall light. Prepare to take it."

He lighted the candle from the torch and passed it through the small window to Joel, who dripped some of the hot tallow and stuck the candle on the top of one of the empty kegs.

"You will stand to the back of the hut while we unbar the door," the man outside ordered. "One of us is holding a musket, and if you attempt to make an attack you will be shot and killed immediately."

Without speaking, Joel moved to the rear of the hut. He heard the bar being let down at the door, then the door was opened. By the light from the candle and torch, he saw the guard and one of the other men, both holding firearms, standing ready to shoot. With some evidence of fear, the other man from the cantina stepped into the hut, bent over and put the tray and smaller olla on the floor.

"Enjoy your meal, Señor Cardway," he said. "No doubt but what it will be your last."

He backed out of the hut, and the door was closed and barred again. Joel stepped close to the window and listened. The guard was protesting about something.

"Perhaps you should speak to Don Roberto about it," one of the men from the cantina told him. "He instructed us to give you the olla of water, but no wine. Don Roberto desires that you remain awake and attend to your duties. No doubt there will be ample wine for you tomorrow. Don Roberto and the others are just now leaving the village."

Joel could hear hoofbeats in the distance, and realized what it meant. Don Roberto and his men were departing for the place they had picked for the ambush of Adam Foxglove's wagon train.

Hunger gnawed at Joel's stomach, and he picked up the tray and olla of wine and carried them over beside the keg upon which the candle was burning. On the tray he found a pot of boiled frijoles and a stack of tortillas. The food was hot. Joel picked up a large wooden spoon with one hand and dipped into the frijoles, and with the other hand lifted the top tortilla of the stack. He stirred the frijoles with the spoon, rolled the tortilla and scooped it full of the beans, and carried the roll to his mouth. He ate ravenously.

Gulping a little of the thin sour wine, running the chance that it too had been drugged, he took up a second tortilla—and stopped all movement. Between the second and third tortilla of the stack was a folded piece of the coarse bark paper used in the district.

Joel seized the paper, arose and tiptoed to the window and looked out. The men from the cantina had left the torch

for the guard, and the man was sitting on the ground beside it, eating and swigging water and muttering because they had not let him have wine. Joel tiptoed back and unfolded the paper and held it near the candle. A scrawl was on it:

Señor Joel:—do not give up hope. I know you are innocent, for I have overheard everything. I will take my own life before I will let Don Roberto claim me as his bride. My heart belongs to you. I will try to come to the hut during the night. I managed to drug the water they are taking to the guard. Don Roberto and his men are preparing to leave. You must escape and live.

Lolita.

Joel was rejoicing inwardly as he thrust the note into his pocket. She had confessed her love for him, and Don Roberto would never claim her.

IF THE guard slept because of the drugged water, and Lolita managed to visit the hut—still he would be a prisoner, for it was probable that the heavy bar over the door was fastened in such a manner that a mere girl could not get the door open.

Joel wolfed down the remainder of the food as he tried to think what could be done, and drank more of the wine. Strength came to him. He was still alive, and had something to fight for. Not only Lolita—there was his old friend, Adam Foxglove, leading his wagon train into danger. And there was the little matter of straightening out this affair so the world would know Joel Cardway was not a cowardly murderer.

He went to the window again and peered out. The guard had toppled back against the wall and was in deep sleep, only a small portion of his food eaten.

The window, Joel had noticed already, was too small to admit of the passage of his body. The adobe casement was as hard as a rock, and he had no tools with which to chip it away. Nor did he have any weapons.

He looked toward the cantina building. No light came from the rooms on the patio. No sounds of revelry came from the big main room. A dog barked in the distance, and a child cried in one of the huts—that was all.

Joel fought back the frenzy that would have seized him. Here was his chance, and he felt that he could do nothing. The drugged guard might as well have been awake and active. Lolita was doing her best to help him, but he could not help himself.

The thought of delay made him almost frantic. If Lolita did manage to get away from the cantina while the others slept and come to the hut, what could she do? Almost all the men in the village had ridden away with Don Roberto. Those who remained believed Joel Cardway to be safely a prisoner. The women and children in the huts could do nothing against him. Yet he could think of no way of escape.

He wanted to be in the saddle, riding at top speed to warn Adam Foxglove or help him fight if it was too late to warn him. He wanted to settle accounts with Don Roberto and Clyde Brater. With his fists clenched at his sides, he paced around the hut, a sense of impotence engulfing him. He stumbled over one of the kegs.

Picking it up and carrying it over beside the other keg upon which the candle burned, Joel inspected the one over which he had stumbled. It was about to come to pieces. Originally it had been filled with some kind of oil, perhaps the crude vegetable oil the Indians extracted from plants and into which fiber torches were dipped to be impregnated so they would burn readily and for a considerable time.

A wild idea came to Joel, the determination to take a desperate chance. He began tearing the keg to pieces, removing the oil-soaked staves. He put the candle on the floor and tore at the other keg.

Again he hurried to the window and looked out. No light at all showed at the cantina now, and none came from the scattered huts. Vista Grande slept. The guard outside the hut still slept, propped against the wall. A short distance away was the corral, and his pony was there, with saddle and bridle on the ground at the corral gate.

Joel smashed one of the keg staves into bits and put the bits against the thick door of heavy wood. He piled the staves over the kindling carefully. Then he picked up the candle and started igniting the heap of fuel.

Two tiny flames appeared after a

time, and smoke drifted upward and toward the window, nauseous smoke that made Joel cough when he got a gulp of it. He picked up his coat and fanned the growing fire with it, and wafted the smoke toward the window as much as he could.

The burning wood cracked, the flames grew, smoke swirled. The wood of the door began smoking, smouldering, and tiny flames ran up the casement. It commenced growing hot in the hut, and the smoke was thickening.

JOEL fanned with his coat, coughing, his eyes smarting. He could see that the door was starting to burn well. He could endure the heat, but the smoke was a danger. He scarcely could breathe. There was not a breath of night breeze to rush into the hut through the window and drive the smoke out.

He narrowed his eyes to mere slits and rushed to the door, kicking at it with all his strength, smashing at it with his heavy boots. The door did not give as much as a fraction of an inch. It was burning, charring, but not weakening. The hinges and latch were of heavy wrought metal fastened to the hard wood with long bolts.

Fanning the smoke away from him, Joel got to the window and gulped fresh air. Smoke poured over his head and out into the night. He was sick for a moment because of smoke he had swallowed.

He glanced toward the cantina and huts, but saw nobody. Some light was coming from the fire, but not enough to attract anybody's attention, and the flames did not crackle loudly enough to be heard by sleepers some distance away.

Back at the door again, trying to hold his breath and narrowing his eyes to slits, Joel kicked at the burning keg staves and managed to pile them against the door better. Perspiration was streaming from his body. He could scarcely see. In a frenzy, he kicked at the door again until both his legs felt numb.

It seemed to him that the bottom of the door finally gave a little. He ran to the window, gulped more fresh air, then hurried back to the door and resumed his kicking. The blaze against the lower part of the door became fiercer, and Joel retreated from it.

His coughing was worse now. The nauseous smoke was thicker. The heat was almost unbearable. Joel got to the window again and looked out. He thought he saw a dark form moving around at the end of the patio, but could not be sure. There was no light except what came from the fire inside the hut, and the thick smoke obscured that to a certain extent.

He hurried back to the door and began kicking again, holding his breath as much as possible and keeping his eyes closed. And suddenly he felt the lower part of the door give, and his boot crashed through it.

That caused a small draft. Air rushed in to drive the smoke upward and through the window. Joel attacked the door like a madman, kicking out the burning boards. He backed away and hurled himself against the door, and felt it give. The heavy bar outside was holding it.

He concentrated on kicking out the lower part, and finally had a hole large enough to get through. Backing to the window, he gulped fresh air again and put on his coat. On hands and knees, he crawled toward the door, judged distance and space, held his breath and charged forward.

His head went through the hole as smoke swirled around him. He felt flames bite into his body through his buckskin clothes. He got his shoulders through, gulped more fresh air. A piece of flaming board fell and grazed his head and struck his shoulder.

Then he was through, gasping and panting, his eyes smarting, his clothes afire, his hair singed. He staggered for a few feet, tearing off his burning coat. He dropped to the sandy earth and rolled in it to extinguish the flames.

When he was on his feet again, he hurried to the burning door, took down the bar and let the door fall. He kicked loose dirt upon the boards until the fire was extinguished.

A gust of wind came to waft the smoke away. There was no light at all from the fire now to attract attention. And he heard running feet, felt some-

body clutch his seared arm, and heard Lolita's voice:

"Señor Joel! Oh, Señor Joel!"

CHAPTER V

Ambush and Battle

THEY clung together a moment, and Joel, despite his hurts, gave attention to something unusual. Lolita was not in her usual skirts, but was dressed in man's clothing.

"Here, Señor Joel!" she said. "Here is your knife, and here is your musket also. I got them from behind the bar in the cantina after my uncle had gone to sleep. Let us hurry now to the corral."

He stumbled along beside her, only dimly realizing what was happening. He drank in the fresh air thankfully, and became aware of his slight burns. Once he stopped to clasp her to him hungrily and claim kisses so long denied him.

"I got here as quickly as I could," she was saying. "I had things to arrange. My pony is in the corral with your own, Señor Joel. Let us saddle up and ride quickly from this place. Let us go to the eastward."

"To Missouri, to my farm," Joel told her. "We can be married at Bent's Fort. We'll travel with the wagon train."

That thought brought him memory of the peril that threatened Adam Foxglove.

"Lolita!" he exclaimed. "Do you know where Don Roberto and his men are to ambush the wagon train?"

"I know that—*sí!* I overheard them talking. It is only about eight miles away. They will strike at dawn when the men of the wagon train are heavy with sleep."

She had to stop speaking suddenly and run after him, for Joel was dashing full speed for the corral. She was beside him when he located his saddle and bridle and began calling softly for his pony in a voice the pony knew well.

"I can call my own pony," Lolita told him, as Joel let down the bars of the corral gate. "We will let the other two ponies get out and run away, so there can be no pursuit."

Joel worked feverishly at his saddling, while the girl got her own mount ready for the trail. His mind was working as swiftly as his hands. He examined his musket as well as he could in the darkness and thrust it into the saddle boot, and put his long knife in its sheath. His supply of powder and ball he had kept in a saddlebag, and it had not been disturbed.

"Lolita, come to me," he said.

She hurried to him through the darkness. "Let us get away from here quickly," she begged.

"You must ride alone."

"Señor Joel! What do you mean?"

"I must ride to help those of the wagon train. My old friend, Adam Foxglove, is in danger. He saved my life once, and I can't refuse to help him now."

"I understand."

"And I must help fight Don Roberto and clear my name, if I can, of the charge of murder," he added. "You wouldn't want a husband folks thought was a cowardly murderer."

"But what shall I do?"

"Listen to me, Lolita. Start at once and ride along the Trail toward the east. Be careful that nobody sees you. If you meet anyone, go into hiding. Are you afraid?"

"Yes, but there is nothing else to be done," she said, with resignation in her voice.

"Ride as far as the place men call Canyon of the Coytes. Do you know where it is?"

"I know."

"Hide near the mouth of the canyon and watch and wait for me. Keep your pony under cover. I'll hurry back to you over the hills as soon as I can leave the wagon train. Then we'll ride side by side to Bent's Fort and be married there, and wait for the wagon train to come along, and go with it on to Missouri—home."

"Oh, Señor Joel, that will be happiness! But if anything happens to you, what shall I do?"

"If I don't show up, you ride on east along the Trail to the Fort, and be very careful, or wait at the Canyon of the Coytes until the wagon train comes

along, and go with it. But you have no food or weapon—"

"I can manage," she interrupted.

HE RODE at her side around the village and got her started eastward. Then he kicked at his own pony's ribs, rode through Vista Grande at top speed, and took the road toward where the wagon train was in peril.

The late moon came up to aid him. He knew this section of the Trail well, and made good speed, giving his pony a breathing spell when necessary. He stopped long enough to fill his canteen at a spring and let the pony drink, then hurried on.

The false dawn came to pink the eastern sky, the first signs of day appeared around the distant snow-capped hills. From the distance, carried to him on the wings of the morning wind, came sounds of wild yells, of gunfire. Joel urged his pony to top speed again.

The wagon train had camped beside a trickling stream at the base of a hill, in a large natural clearing. The attack by Don Roberto and his men had come from two hillsides. The bandits commanded the Trail in either direction.

Joel saw all that at a glance as he came to the crest of a hill after leaving the Trail and circling. The bandits were working their horses down the hillsides through the thick brush, loading and firing leisurely from good cover.

The men of the wagon train were returning the fire from behind the wagons. Some of their stock had been stampeded and the animals were running wild. The top of one Conestoga wagon was in flames.

Joel dismounted in a thicket of brush and tied his pony to the limb of a stunted tree. He thrust ammunition into his pockets and inspected his musket again, and made sure that the long knife was in its sheath on his belt. Then he began working his way through the brush cautiously, behind the bandits attacking from that side.

As he came to a place from which he could have a view of the wagon train again, he saw the bandits commence a charge, firing and yelling defiance. They emerged from the brush on both sides and dashed through the high grass. At a swift glance, Joel judged there were about twenty of them.

But they were compelled to leave the protection of the high grass and rush along the narrow creek where there were only a few rocks affording cover, and there the wagon train men got in their work. Weapons blazed from behind the wagons. Attacking bandits fell on the gravel beside the creek.

Joel began hurrying. He came within range, and fired at the bandit nearest the wagons, and saw him sprawl face downward. And he began shouting as he reloaded, and the wind carried his voice down to the train:

"Adam! Adam Foxglove! Here we are! This is Joel Cardway! We'll help you drive off the scum!"

It was his idea to make the bandits think that not one man alone but several men were attacking them in the rear. He fired again, and another bandit sprawled. The withering fire from the defenders of the wagon train had stopped the bandits.

Most of those remaining unhurt, believing they had been caught between two fires, turned to race their mounts for cover. Fire from the wagons cut them down. Joel charged down the hillside and keeping to the brush, emerged near the wagon train, shouting at Adam Foxglove as he ran. He was not eager to be mistaken by the men of the train as a bandit and be picked off by a bullet.

The last of the bandits were in full retreat, suffering losses even as they went, when he reached the wagons, musket in one hand, his long knife now in the other hand.

He saw two of the bandits running toward the fringe of brush, and saw horses tied there. Since these two were not among the mounted outlaws, they apparently had laid back to direct the attack. Joel recognized them as Don Roberto and Clyde Brater. He stopped, threw up his musket and fired, and Brater dropped to the ground. Joel picked up his knife again, charged on, and Don Roberto, a snarl of rage upon his face, turned to meet him.

As men started out from the wagons with weapons held ready, Joel tossed his musket aside, brandished his knife and ran on. Knowing that all was lost, and

thirsting for vengeance, Don Roberto lumbered forward to meet him.

"Your plans didn't work out," Joel told him, between gasps for breath. "Do your own fighting now for a change, you murdering swine!"

AS THEY clashed together and locked hilts, Joel heard the voice of Adam Foxglove as the wagon train leader shouted to his men. Most of the men ran toward the scene of the knife fight, and from Adam Foxglove came a bellow of encouragement for Joel. Don Roberto exerted his utmost strength at that instant and hurled Joel aside and off balance.

But Joel sidestepped quickly and in time to dodge the follow-up charge and slash of the knife. His own knife slashed into Don Roberto's left shoulder. They crashed together again, strained and tugged and disengaged. Joel felt the burning streak as the bandit's blade ripped his upper left arm. He began fighting like a maniac, driving Don Roberto back by his furious attack.

Again Joel's knife brought blood, and this time Don Roberto reeled aside, dropped his weapon and sank slowly to the ground. Joel sprang forward to stand above him.

"That got you, swine!" he said. "Adam!"

"Here, lad!" Adam Foxglove called. "Thanks for your help. You reached us just in time, comin' up behind the rats that way. But where are the other men?"

"I'm alone," Joel confessed. "That man I shot last?"

"He's still alive. Maybe he'll live long enough to stretch rope. But this one you cut won't."

"This man on the ground is Don Roberto. He had one of his men killed in Vista Grande and tried to put the blame on me. It didn't work, Don Roberto."

"But it was—a good plan, señor," Don Roberto said.

"Then you admit your plot?"

"Why not—since I am dying."

"Did you hear that, Adam? Did you other men hear?"

They said they had. Joel lurched across to where two of the wagon train men were watching over Brater, and Adam Foxglove and the others followed.

"You've got it bad, Brater," Joel said.

"It had to come some time, Señor Cardway."

"Don Roberto is dying. He just confessed about the plot against me. He admitted I didn't kill Sam Detlan."

"I killed Detlan myself—at Roberto's orders—and fixed the evidence against you," Brater confessed.

Joe reeled aside, and Adam Foxlove's arm suddenly supported him.

"What's happened to you, lad?" Adam asked. "Your hair's singed off your head, and your clothes are burned. You're a mess."

"Get me water, Adam, and something to eat," Joel begged. "Please have one of your men bring my pony—he's tied up there in the brush. Let me rest for a few minutes while I tell you the story and fix up my cuts, and then I've got to ride like the wind."

"Ride? In your condition, lad?"

"Oh, I'm all right except for a few little burns and cuts. There's a pretty señorita waiting for me to join her at the Canyon of the Coyotes."

Adam grinned. "Ah? The little Perez beauty from Vista Grande?"

Joel grinned also. "Her name won't be Perez very long after we reach Bent's Fort and find the preacher there. We'll wait there until you come along with the train, Adam. And then we'll travel on with you to Missouri—and home."

COMING NEXT MONTH

GUNSMOKE'S HAPPY NEW YEAR

Another Action-Packed Story by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Langley slapped at his holster and his gun came up roaring

A Friend of LAUGHING FOX

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

THE four big covered wagons were drawn up in a circle in the center of the stretch of open country. The people in the wagon train had been given little time to get ready for the Indian attack. Like a swarm of mosquitoes rising from a swamp, the band of Sioux warriors had appeared all around them, and the battle started.

"Looks bad," muttered old Keith

Tom Langley Sounds a Bugle for Frontier Peace!

Fenton, the boss of the train, as he crouched behind the big wheel of a wagon, his rifle in his hands. "They outnumber us three to one."

The Indians circled the train, whooping and yelling as they rode. They fired steadily, some of them using rifles and others bow and arrows. Four of the men with the wagon train had been killed and three wounded, but they were taking a steady toll of the attackers. At least ten of the Sioux had died and many others were wounded.

"Heard there is an army post five miles to the south," said the man next to Fenton. "Shore wish them soldiers would show up now."

In a brief lull in the fighting, there came the clear notes of a bugle from beyond the rise to the southward. The chief of the raiders uttered a guttural command and waved his right arm.

The Indians bunched their ponies and then galloped off to the northward, to finally disappear in the distance. It had all happened so fast that for a few moments a blank silence hung over the wagon train. From the south again came the sound of the bugle.

"Looks like yuh got yore wish in a hurry, Hall," Fenton said finally. "Sounds like the whole Army is comin'."

"Them Sioux shore felt that way about it," said Ned Hall, a member of the caravan. "They shore hightailed it away from here."

The men of the wagon train waited, peering to the southward, eager to get a glimpse of the blue clad cavalry column as they topped the rise. In the wagons, the women and children stirred restlessly, not sure what might happen next.

"What in blazes!" exclaimed Fenton.

A single rider appeared on the top of the hill. He was mounted on a powerful roan that was moving swiftly as the horse galloped down the hill. The man in the saddle was dressed in range clothes.

"Where are the soldiers?" Hall asked. "I don't see them."

"Me neither," said Fenton. "It shore is puzzlin'."

AT LENGTH the horseman rode closer and in a few minutes he had reached the train. They saw that he was young and strong-faced and there was a reckless air about him.

"Howdy, folks," the stranger began as he halted his mount. The men of the wagon train gathered around him. The women were busy taking care of the wounded. "Tom Langley is the name," the stranger went on. "I reckon you are all plumb grateful to me for savin' yuh from them Indians."

"From doin' what?" Fenton stared at Langley in amazement. "I thought yuh said yuh saved us from them redskins?"

"I did." Langley swung out of saddle. "That was me blowing that bugle yuh heard. Got it in my saddle-roll. Seen the Indians attacking the train from where I was over on the hill. So I kept out of sight and started blowin' the bugle to make the Sioux think the soldiers were comin'. Reckon that ain't the first time that trick has been worked —but it shore fooled them."

"How come yuh know how to blow a bugle?" the wagon train boss asked.

"I used to be in the cavalry as a bugler," said Langley, "I got out after my hitch was over. Had to get up too early in the mornin's." He grinned. "Now I'm the best scout and wagon guide in this territory."

"Shore yuh ain't bein' too modest about it?" asked Fenton dryly. He was raw-boned, middle-aged and had seen a lot of life. "But we are thankin' you for drivin' those Indians away."

"If they stay away," said Hall, who was another old-timer. "The Sioux ain't fools. They probably have some of their band watching to see how many soldiers did show up. They might come back."

"No they won't," said Langley. "Happens that a troup of cavalry rode north about an hour or so ago. Since the Indians went in the same direction, there's a good chance of them tangling with the soldiers. If not, keeping out of the way will have the Sioux too busy to bother with the wagon train again."

"All the same I think we better get movin' on westward," said Fenton. "Get them wagons rollin', men."

"Of course yuh need a good guide to go along with you," said Tom Langley. "Say a feller like me."

"I'm guidin' this train," said a big

square-faced man who had been silently watching and listening ever since Langley had arrived. "And we been gettin' along all right up to now."

"Except for a little trouble from some Indians," said Langley. He stared at the big man and then his eyes narrowed. "Mark Harrington, eh? I didn't recognize yuh at first without that thick black beard yuh usually wear. They do say a leopard can't change his spots, but I ain't so shore of that now."

"Warned yuh the last time we met that we were goin' to tangle," growled Harrington. "And I'm shore that this wagon train doesn't want a friend of Chief Laughing Fox hanging around here."

"Laughing Fox!" exclaimed Fenton as he listened. "Heard that he was the chief of the Sioux in this part of the country. So I reckon he must have been bossin' them raidin' Indians."

"No he wasn't," said Langley quickly. "Chief Laughing Fox wants peace with the white men." He glanced at Harrington. "But there's some folks don't want it that way."

"That's right," said Harrington. "And one of them could be you, Langley. Strikes me there was somethin' funny about the way them Indians beat it away from here soon as they heard that bugle."

"Meanin' what?" Langley demanded tensely, his hand close to the Colt in his holster. "What are yuh drivin' at, Harrington?"

"Like Hall said," stated Harrington. "Them Sioux ain't fools. There were a lot of them here, and even if they did hear a bugle, I figger they would have waited to see how many soldiers were comin' unless—"

The big man deliberately left the sentence unfinished and grinned wolfishly at Langley.

"Unless what?" demanded Fenton in a sharp voice.

"Unless them bugle calls were a signal to the Sioux that the soldiers were somewhere close around here," said Harrington. "And they better get away quick. A signal from a friend of Chief Laughing Fox."

"Why you lyin' sidewinder!" shouted Langley.

LANGLEY leaped forward and smashed a hard right against Harrington's chin. The big man staggered back, but he was tough and he didn't go down. He uttered a roar of rage and came back at Langley with a right to the body and a left to the head that packed plenty of power. In a moment both men were fighting fast and furiously.

None of the men with the wagon train made an attempt to stop the fight. This was strictly between Langley and Harrington, and in the mood Fenton's outfit were now, they were not overly inclined to trust either man.

Both fighters were taking a lot of punishment, but so far neither man had been battered to any marked degree. Langley ducked as Harrington aimed a powerful punch at his head. The blow slid by Langley's left ear, and then he hit Harrington on the chin and knocked him down. The big man staggered up and Langley knocked him to the ground again. Harrington had enough. He just sat there dazedly.

"Figgered on guiding the train through this part of the country so the Sioux wouldn't bother yuh again," Langley told Fenton. "But I've changed my mind." He smiled grimly. "After all the talkin' Harrington has been doin' I don't reckon you folks would trust me."

"We haven't said that." Fenton spoke slowly. "And we're not denying it either. From what I have heard, the attack on the wagons wasn't the first Indian raid that's happened around here in the past couple of months and yet the Sioux in this region are supposed to be peaceful."

Langley just nodded as he went to his horse, picked up the reins and swung into saddle. For a moment he sat there watching as Harrington got slowly to his feet.

"I'm goin' to the Sioux camp now," Langley said. "If I can get Chief Laughing Fox to agree to keep peace, there will be no more trouble for the wagon trains in this part of the country."

No one spoke as Langley wheeled his powerful roan and rode away heading to the eastward across a stretch of wild, hilly country. Once he glanced back and saw that wagons were lining up

ready to move on.

Night had fallen when Tom Langley reached the camp of the Sioux, far back in the hills. In the distance, the campfires of the Indians gleamed like fireflies. He saw shadowy forms moving about in front of the tepees. There was danger ahead—for while Langley was a friend of Chief Laughing Fox, to the other Indians he would be just a white man spying on them.

For a few moments he halted the roan and sat in the saddle thinking. Once he thought he heard muffled hoofbeats somewhere back in the direction from which he had come, but though he listened, the sound was not repeated. Ever since that first hour after he had left the wagon train he had thought he was being followed, but had not been sure of it.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered as he rode on. He rode right into the camp, and when war-painted warriors menaced him on all sides he spoke in the language of the Sioux.

"I have come to see Chief Laughing Fox," he said. "Take me to him."

There were angry murmurs from the Indians around him, and Langley knew they did not believe him. To his relief, Laughing Fox suddenly appeared. There was something majestic about the old chief as he stood there in the flickering light of a nearby fire. He wore an elaborate head-dress of eagle feathers and was clad in buckskin. His face was old and lined, but there was power in his dark eyes and in the way he stood.

"The white man speaks truth," he said in his own tongue. "He is the friend of Laughing Fox."

Langley slid out of saddle, and at a command from the chief, one of the other Indians led his horse away. Laughing Fox led the way to his tepee. This stood remote from the others in the camp. In the light of the fire, the two men sat on the ground and talked.

"There has been raiding by the warriors of yore tribe," Langley said. "Attacks on the wagon trains. The commander at the fort knows that I am the friend of Laughing Fox. He has asked me to see you and tell you the raiding must stop."

"Some of my braves are young and reckless," said Laughing Fox. "A new rifle or a bottle of firewater tempts them. There has been a white man supplying them with both. I do not know this man."

"It could be that I do," said Langley in the Sioux language. "At least I suspect him. But as your friend I ask that you make sure your braves do no more raiding, Chief Laughing Fox."

"So it shall be." The old chief picked up a long stemmed pipe. He filled and lighted it and then smoked for a few moments.

"We smoke the Pipe of Peace on this," he said, handing the pipe over to Tom Langley.

Langley took the pipe in his left hand. He stood up quickly as he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure beyond the fire, and saw the glint of light on metal. Suddenly a gun roared and a bullet struck the bowl of the peace pipe. Langley slapped at his holster and his gun came up roaring in his right hand.

FROM the shadows there came a moan of pain and then the thud of a falling body. The sounds of the two shots had stirred the camp into an uproar. But in a few moments Chief Laughing Fox had things again quieted down. With a burning torch from the fire in his hand, Langley went to the spot where the man he had shot had fallen.

"Harrington," he muttered as he stared at the face that glared up at him. "I thought you were the one who has been stirring up the Indians—and I was right."

"You got me," Harrington said weakly. "I'm cashin' in. Yuh were right. Been sneakin' guns and liquor to some of the Indians. There was gold and cash in them wagon trains and the Indians didn't bother much with that. I got it after the raids were over." He looked wildly at Langley. "You blasted bugler—might have known yuh'd blow 'Taps' for me!" The big man shuddered and grew still.

"There will be peace now," said Chief Laughing Fox as he stood beside Langley. "The one who stirred my warriors to evil is no longer with us."

"What are you doing in our timber?" Bess Wheeler demanded

KEEPER OF THE BENCHLAND

By CLIFF V. ABRAMS

When Old Man River gets war in his whiskers, it takes a hombre with plenty of real savvy to stop the damage!

HE CAME down to the Wheeler headquarters on a work mare, his shoes shoved tight in the stirrups and his hat tipped down against the rising sun. That sun warmed and brightened the whole bottom and drew a sparkle from the swollen river, but it put little warmth in the heart of Joe Crest.

He pulled up at the ranchhouse gate, got down and clipped an abrupt, "Cap Wheeler around?"

The young dark-eyed fellow leaning against the gate post eyed him suspiciously. "Yeah. Why?"

Crest's eyes slid to the girl who stood just inside the gate. "Could I see him a minute, please?"

"Why, I guess so," she answered coolly.

She was tall, Crest noticed. Almost as tall as himself, which was just under

six feet. Yet, she wasn't awkward. Just slim, tall and graceful like the willows of the river bar in front of his claim. She started to walk toward the house.

"Wait, Bess. I can do all the talking that needs to be done around this here place."

Crest whirled. "You taken Wheeler's place?" His lean jaw was belligerent, his blue eyes cold.

"I'm his foreman," the other snapped. "Now state your business. I'm in a hurry." He drew himself up haughtily.

"Got that way fast, didn't you?" Crest said pointedly. "My business is with Wheeler and no other."

The foreman glared and balled his fists, but at that moment a man stepped onto the ranch-house veranda. "Hartman," he boomed, "you'd better pick up the boys and get to riding. Them cattle will be drifting back."

As he turned to obey, Hartman said sneeringly to Crest, "Some other time, farmer, if you still got something on your mind."

Crest knew the man was itching for a fight, but he merely nodded and stalked to the house. The girl had disappeared indoors, but Cap Wheeler waited. "Well?" he grunted. He was a straight, powerfully built, gray-eyed man in his forties.

"I see you moved your cattle this morning," Crest said bluntly.

"Well?"

"Through my cornfield. Maybe you noticed?"

"Cornfield! That what it was? My boys said they stumbled through something. Thought it was just some kinda weed that sprung up to kill out good grass."

"Took danged good care they didn't stop to inquire. My cro—"

Wheeler raised his hand. "Cowboys ain't acquainted with no danged crop—not on this range."

"Their ignorance is gonna cost you just ten dollars an acre for every acre that was tramped down this morning. Twenty acres in that plot—$200." Wheeler merely snorted so Crest went on, "The next time you're bringing cattle down, come by the bluff land when you cross my claim."

WHEELER eyed him scornfully. "I don't suppose you know those gulches are blamed near impossible to get through?"

"Maybe so," Crest retorted. "But you sure ain't invited to cross my field again."

Wheeler's face went red. "Invited! Why, you long-legged spade stomper! Were you invited to come in here? Plow up grassland? No! But your kind's always done it. That was the best feeding bench in the country you ruined!"

"So that's the sticker. Someone took a chunk of land and it don't set so good. You didn't own it, but you had it covered. Thought you had it cinched. Your cinch busted on that free range and you're mad."

"Free range! A plow-pusher wouldn't understand them words. They ain't in no law books," Wheeler said bitterly. "Now, look. You're askin' damages. I ain't payin'. But I will pay you to quit this river bottom. Pick up and git! I'll give you a fair and square price for that whole claim—that grassland."

"Nope, Wheeler, it ain't for sale. Besides, it ain't grassland. It's meller and loose. It's corn ground."

"Yeah? Let me tell you somethin', young feller. In this country a fellow keeps just what he's man enough to hold. Think you're man enough?" Wheeler taunted.

Crest grinned coldly. "Maybe. I'm broke. I know I can't collect what I got comin'. It wouldn't do me any good to hunt a job. Not with ranchers, it wouldn't. But here's somethin' to chew on. There's still fish in the creek. You can't starve me out. I'm hangin' on to that land. You try anything and I sure aim to give an account of myself—even if it comes to guns."

Wheeler's heavy face went white. "Guns!" he croaked. A big finger suddenly pointed tremblingly to a clump of willows on the broad river valley. "A woman sleeps there. Guns! One of your breed put her there!"

Crest was shaken by the naked hate coming from the man. "My breed! Mister, you're crazy! Whatever you're sayin' ain't got nothing to do with me. I—"

Too late, Crest saw the heavy fist coming. It caught him on the temple and sent him spinning from the porch. He landed on his back on the hard-packed earth.

The girl was standing beside Crest when he opened his eyes. There was a basin in her hand. For a time, he just looked at her. Slowly, he sat up, feeling his damp head and face. "Well?" he asked, getting to his feet.

The girl looked at the empty basin. "I'm sorry," she said soberly. "Dad goes half crazy sometimes when he thinks of her."

"You're his daughter?" Crest's head and neck ached as though they had been pounded with a hammer. "That woman must have been your mother."

"Yes, but I don't remember her. I was only a few weeks old."

Crest glanced around. "I wanted to ask him about that, but I didn't have a chance."

"People around here are pretty touchy about their old range and how it's used, including dad." A faint smile flickered on the girls lips and was gone. "He's down at the barn. Before he went he told me to dump this basin over what was in the yard. Now, I reckon you'd better climb that mare and blow." Her gray eyes coolly examined him.

"In the eyes of range folks, other people ain't to have land for a home? Even when Uncle Sam says they can? Is that it?"

THE girl blushed. "I wouldn't say that exactly. It is the way we here are made to feel about—about— You wanted to learn about mother." She changed swiftly. "Years ago a man settled in the country. He began butchering dad's cattle on the sly. Dad finally told him if he needed beef to come to the ranch like a white man. He and dad fought. A few nights later mother opened the door. The same fellow was waiting with a shot-gun."

"Good gosh!" Crest breathed.

"Oh, they don't know for sure. He may have tried to shoot past her at dad in the lamp-light, but—" The girl spread slim hands. "That's all. You know now why he hates sod-busters."

"So everyone that digs, everyone that plows for a living is tainted with that hound's color. Isn't that the way it is?"

"That's about it," Bess Wheeler agreed soberly.

"I suppose you feel the same as the rest?"

"No! I try to be fair. Where are you going?" she asked as Crest started off.

"I'm finding your dad and telling him I'm danged sorry. Maybe he'll understand I ain't no cur just 'cause I'm a farmer."

"No! Wait! You'll do no good. Please." She caught his arm.

"I'm sure tryin'!" Crest lifted her hand gently.

"No!"

He grinned at her. "Are you bein' fair now?"

Angry lights flickered in Bess's eyes. "You'll just cause another row," she snapped. "Wasn't one enough?" Her tone was scornful.

"But, Ma'am, I gotta right to! Hey!"

She had darted to the porch and snatched up a quirt. Its raw lashes hissed within inches of his face. "Get back!"

For moments, Crest stood facing her. "No female's ever waved a hoss-whip in my face before," he said quietly, and lunged. He pinioned her arms to her sides and jerked her close.

Her mouth opened to yell. Crest stopped it with a hard kiss. She jerked her head aside and started fighting. "Oh, you—" Her hot breath struck his face. "Let me go!" Her eyes smoked with anger and she fought to free her arms.

"Promise to drop that whip and act like a lady?"

"No. I—I won't!" she declared. "I'll—"

"Then be a fool!" Crest shoved her away.

The girl's lifted whip fell.

"Well, I'm waiting!" It was his turn to be scornful.

Bess's mouth opened, closed and opened again. "I only—" She choked and started to cry.

"Sho' now," Crest said softly. "That's no way to feel. Say, why not ride up some evenin'? I got a home-made skiff. I'll take you fishin'. It's real pretty at night on the river, when the moon slips

through the clouds and the water sings under the skiff's bottom. Yeah, Bess, come go fishin'."

"Fishing! With you? Why, I wouldn't be seen with you at a—"

"A dog-fight," he helped her.

"Yes, a dog-fight! Now, you get out of here!"

THE threat of new trouble came just as Crest reached home. A rider dashed from the upper timber and jerked his blowing horse to a halt in front of the shack. "Hi! You the owner of this here spread."

"Yeah. Why?"

"Maybe you ain't noticed," the fellow gestured toward the river, "that the old creek's sure arisin'."

"Yeah, I noticed. June raise. Usual ain't it?"

"Yeah! But what's comin' ain't. Not if reports are true. Snow in Montany's went with a rush. The hull upper river's a-frothin'. She's liable to jump her bank any minute and wash you fellows out."

Crest eyed the river. Dirty froth rode her swollen surface. An uprooted tree rolled past. "She's flooded low bottoms already, but she won't jump here. Ain't even apt to cut."

The surprised rider's jaw sagged at Crest's calm words. "By thunder, maybe you know! Just the same, the word's bein' passed." He gathered his reins and galloped off toward the Wheeler ranch. Crest watched him go before entering the cabin.

The river didn't worry Crest. Down where the big Mississippi crawled through the flatlands, he'd grown up on a small farm where as much time was spent with the river as the plow. That was why this spot had appealed to him when he drifted west like thousands of others in the '80s. A homestead by the river was what he'd wanted and found. But the way things looked he'd have plenty of trouble sticking to it.

That night Crest baited a half-dozen throw-lines and heaved them into the current. From where he worked, he could see the Wheeler ranch lights and his thoughts turned to Bess Wheeler.

By morning Crest had taken forty pounds of channel cats and had moved back his tie-stakes several times. The last time he retreated with them something in the motion of the swollen river caught and held his attention.

For a long time he studied it. Then he turned and swept his gaze along the shore. It came to rest downstream, on the Wheeler land.

As he watched, a giant cottonwood swayed slowly out, then plunged. A sheet of yellow water leaped. Even before the hollow booming sound had reached his ears, the tree was gone, rolling and pitching. Just heavy drift riding the channel.

"There's liable to be trouble down there before she's through," Crest muttered. He dumped his catch into a gunny-sack, saddled his mare and headed for town. A channel cat was worth 12c undressed in the eyes of any butcher in the country.

A mile out the Wheeler girl and Hartman, the foreman, overtook Crest. They flashed past on the run. Hartman was rigged in silk shirt, saddle pants, bench-made boots and white Stetson. The girl wore a divided skirt of fawn. Her flat-brimmed hat sported a rhinestone band. Her richly-colored half-boots must have cost at least forty dollars.

"A cattle king's daughter—and I kissed her." Crest glanced down at his own battered rig, at the bulky gunny-sack thumping wetly against his leg.

The little cowtown was busy. Most of the talk was of the river. Crest stood listening for a time in front of the only General Store. As he knew some of the crowd by sight, he walked over and joined in.

"One time down in Mississippi, Uncle Nip kept me up all night swingin' an axe in order to—" Crest stopped. The interest in the river had faded as soon as he opened his mouth.

"You have many weak cows last spring, Dave?" One turned his back and spoke to a neighbor.

"Nope. But I hear Cap Wheeler's—Hey! Hello there! Here's Cap's girl and Tony Hartman now. How're you, kids? How're things, Bessie?"

"Just fine, thank you." The girl smiled. Her hand was tucked in her escort's hand. They paused by the group, and Crest walked away.

It was plain to him that his presence wasn't wanted. He saw the girl's eyes on him as he left. He touched his hat and she quickly turned to her friends.

Crest went into the store, got his sack of provisions and tied it to the saddle. To heck with everyone. He was going home where he belonged. He was keenly aware of the visiting and gossiping still going on as he swung up. It was again of the river.

"Dad says our only danger is in the south pasture," Bess Wheeler was saying. "He and the boys are watching it pretty close."

On an impulse, Crest reined over to where she stood. "Miss Bess," he said, "it's none of my business, but your dad had better watch his timber end. The current's swung over up there." They could take his advice or leave it, he didn't care which.

The girl started to answer, but Hartman's voice came first. "See that you watch your end, Crest. I'm able to take care of ours."

"I'm wonderin'," Crest said. Immediately tension came over the group.

"Are, eh? Well, wonder about this. It's that other time I promised you."

The fight began in a twinkling. Crest saw Bess Wheeler's startled eyes, as she caught the hat Hartman flung at her. Then he was busy—busier than he'd ever been before in his life.

Hartman proved as quick as a bobcat and he had science. Crest was no slouch, but his was the rough and tumble way, learned from the boatmen. Even and fast the fight went for a time.

Then a savage right to the chin did it —put Crest down, and out cold.

Hartman turned, fumbled for his hat. Bess Wheeler handed it to him. Her hands dropped and clenched at her sides until the knuckles stood out white and hard.

WHEN he rode out of town, the knowledge that he had left behind the impression that he possessed guts if nothing else eased Crest little.

He tossed restlessly in his bunk that night. He hurt from head to foot, but he'd been beaten up before; so it wasn't that which bothered him. Thoughts walked endlessly through his mind.

No one wanted him here. They hated his kind. A girl's gray eyes, the way her mouth looked. What was she doing tonight? Fussing over Hartman probably. Patching his busted face, tenderly leaning close. Loving him.

Awh, heck! It was her privilege, if she wanted it that way. She'd marry the guy some day. Hartman was her class. Sat straight in the saddle and wore silk shirts. A sod-buster? He was lucky if he had any kind of shirt.

With a snort Crest sat up, dug his pipe from his pants on the floor and tried to smoke. It tasted rotten. He tamped the ashes down, dressed and went out doors.

As he stood listening to the river, a steady booming sound came from downstream. "She's a-cuttin' and danged fast. Wonder why the fools ain't started work," he muttered. After listening awhile longer, he went back to bed and slept.

Woodpeckers drumming on the outer wall at the head of his bed roused Crest. When he stepped out doors, his first glance was down-stream. He was stunned at the destruction he saw.

Three-fourths of the Wheeler timber was gone. The rest was going. The river was actually gobbling the land. Built up by it as bottom lands are, the river was taking everything away. Only when sheer chalkrock bluffs, the frontier of the true land, were reached would it stop, curve away and roll on. In a year, a hundred or a thousand, the current might again swing away. Once more a lush bench would be built and loaned for a time to man.

Cap Wheeler was fighting back this morning. Axes flashed. Trees were being felled along the caving bank. Wheeler was trying desperately to throw in a buffer. Crest dug out an old pair of field glasses and watched.

A tree with roots and soil went. The crew rushed to the spot and felled a half dozen others. They twisted on a barbwire cable above and below the cut before each tree toppled, and moored the butts to the stumps, leaving only the bushy tops in the river. Another fifty yards down-stream went. The Wheeler crew whirled in that direction.

Crest laid the glasses aside. He'd seen

enough. Tomorrow, the next day at the latest, the Wheeler Ranch would be only a memory. "If Cap Wheeler wants to live on the ranch after this, he'll have to build up in the gulches," he muttered.

Crest could suddenly see a home among the hills on a flat where alkali lay like snow. He moved restlessly down to his own timber. A glance told him that all was well. The river had reached its peak. The main channel still ran straight.

"Maybe I should show you how to win, Cap Wheeler. But, in this country, a man keeps just what he's strong enough to hold. That's your words, Cap Wheeler," he said bitterly.

Three hours later Crest again lifted the glasses. He saw wagons at the door of the ranchhouse. Furniture was being loaded. Later, everything moved toward the hills.

From the dust rising from the wagons, Bess rode swiftly. By the lone clump of willows on the bench, she drew rein and, head bowed, sat the saddle. Crest suddenly lowered the glasses.

An hour later, halfway on the upward climb of the rough land, Bess Wheeler pulled up her horse. Her attitude became that of one listening. "Dad," she called thickly, "who's back there?" Her eyes moved quickly over the crew.

"Back where?" Wheeler growled from the seat of the last wagon.

"Back home. Back in the timber." She held her horse motionless in the road.

"Nobody, you little fool!" Her father's answer was rough.

"But I thought—I'm positive I heard a sound."

"Just the river a-workin'. Come on!" Wheeler clucked to his team.

Bess Wheeler lingered. Slow bewilderment came over her face. "It isn't the river, dad. It's—it's an axe. Someone chopping!" She swung her horse around, her spurs flashed.

"Where you goin'?" Her father swung sharply around. "Don't you go foolin' aroun' down there!"

JOE CREST turned his sweating face to the girl, as she rode up. His shirt was laid aside and his feet wide-spread. "Hello, lady," he panted. His axe again bit into the cottonwood in front of him.

"What're you doing in our timber?" Bess Wheeler demanded.

Crest snorted. "Your timber! Looks like it's the Big Muddy's. Anyway, she's wantin' what's left. I just took a notion to stop her, that's all!"

"Indeed!" she said icily. "I'll have you know that dad and the boys worked here all morning. They had to give up!"

He straightened and pointed. "Lady, please, go yonder and leave me be. I got work to do an' haven't time to jaw."

Bess wheeler flipped around, then jerked back to examine the work Crest had done. A solid line of trees was in the river. From a hundred yards up-stream, they floated end to end, were moored with twisted wire and were held snugly against the bank by the pressure of the current. "They won't stay there," she said dubiously. "Those anchor stumps'll go the same as dad's."

"Will, eh? Look, Lady. Your dad should have started falling where the current first struck, let out his wire and floated his timber. Stickin' in one end—ridin' the other! Good Lord! Sure the river undermined his anchor stumps! Nothin' to stop it!" Crest ended severely.

"Then you really know how?" She looked at him wonderingly. "You can really stop it?"

Crest grunted. His axe again swung. "If you're so blame anxious to find out, just you help. Skeddaddle. Find more wire for cables. We're about out. Only had about a half spool I lu—" She was gone before he could finish.

A long length of barbwire was on the end of her lariat when she again dismounted. "It's from the old horse pasture by the foothills," she told Crest. "What do I do now?" She was trembling with eagerness.

"Bust it in about sixty foot lengths. Double it back a time or two and twist the pieces." He grinned as she rushed to obey.

It was swift hard work. Wheeler and Hartman were slipping from their saddles before Crest and the girl were aware of them. "Bess! What you doin'?" Wheeler bellowed.

"Oh, Dad! Mister Crest is stopping the river. I'm helping him. It's working, Dad! It's working!" She panted hysterically.

Wheeler strode to the river edge. "By gosh!" he breathed. "By gosh!" He swung to Crest. "What's this for, feller?"

"You fellers wouldn't understand!" Crest lashed out. "But I just can't stand to see a good piece of ground wasted." He wiped his dripping face.

Wheeler's heavy, strained face paled. "Boy," he choked, "boy, if you'd care to fergit. Just this once, son. I'd be proud." He held out his hand.

"Sure, old-timer, sure!" A mist was before Crest's eyes. He fumbled for the hand, pressed hard. "Sure," he repeated.

A look that was almost pitiful came over Wheeler's face. He turned and roared, "Hartman, what you hangin' back for? Come here and ask a man to shake your dirty paw."

Hartman hesitatingly stepped forward. Then Wheeler, again boss of his holdings, ordered. "Tony, you ride for the boys with the wagons. Get them down here to take over. Joe here is dang nigh tuckered. Gal, you can ride along, too. Or stay whichever you want."

Crest looked at Bess Wheeler. He wanted her to stay, but she swung into her own saddle and rode off, stirrup to stirrup with Hartman. He didn't see her again that day.

He plodded home by way of the river-bluffs shortly after the Wheeler crew rode down. He had shown them how to fight an angry river. That was all they needed of him.

ONE evening weeks later when the river was low, Crest had just shoved his skiff out to set lines from a river-bar by moonlight when—"Hello there! Can I go along?" Bess Wheeler stepped from the shadows of the river timber.

Crest jerked around. "Why, lady! Ain't you lost?"

"I am not!" She scrambled down the sandy bank. "I'm going fishing. I was invited. Remember? A long time ago?"

"So you were. I never thought you'd come." He helped her into the boat, but remained standing. She looked at him questioningly. "Where's Hartman?" he asked, watching the timber.

"Hartman!" she echoed. "Was he invited?"

Crest sat down suddenly. "You didn't come alone? At night?"

The girl tilted her head. "You said when the moon was sliding through the clouds, and the river was singing." She dipped her hand into the cool water.

Crest caught the oars and swung the skiff out. He could scarcely believe he was awake, until she spoke. "Why didn't you ever come back, Joe? It's been a long time since we fought the river together."

"You left first," Crest answered quietly. "You didn't come back."

"I went to the wagons to get a cake I'd baked and packed that morning. Then I stopped to make sandwiches and coffee. I brought it all down to the river, but you'd gone."

"And you didn't go just to be with Hartman?"

"Hartman! Hartman! Is that all I can hear?"

"But from the looks of things, I figured you and him were—"

Crest got no further. "We are not!" she interrupted hotly. "We were engaged once. I broke it the day of that fight in town."

"Why then? Why, lady, that fight was all right. Was fair and square—a real lulu." Crest grinned. "While it lasted."

"Perhaps," she said severely, "but he had no business starting it. And—and—Joe, you only offered friendship, and we treated you like a dog!"

Crest's hand reached and caught hers. "Sho' now, lady, don't start that cryin' again. Don't. Look, Bess! The moon's up there aslippin' through the clouds. An' the river, it's a-singin'. Listen! Can't you hear it, Bess?"

"Yes, I hear it, Joe," she whispered.

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE BONANZA KING

A Novelet of the Mining Country by JOSEPH CHADWICK

WINCHESTER LAW

Sam pulled trigger and felt the Walker buck

CHAPTER I

Rainbow's End

A GREASY tarp flung across the wagon box behind Sam Branch concealed the blanket-wrapped corpse which the Circle B boss was hauling across-country to the coroner's office in Gypsum Butte.

It was this dead man who accounted for Branch being out here on the rim of Quaker Basin an hour after sunrise, for this was an arid section of the spread which he hadn't visited in a year and probably wouldn't have sized up for another.

Pulling the mule team to a halt, Branch placed a hard brown hand above his eyes and squinted against the oblique sunrays, wondering if this scene of bustling activity at the foot of the slope could be a mirage conjured up by the heat waves.

FOR NESTERS

A Complete Novelet by

WALKER A. TOMPKINS

When a nester camp took root on Sam Branch's range he didn't like it—but he gave them a hearing, anyway, while roaring guns dulled the voice of reason!

No, it was real. A nester's camp had taken root on his range sometime during the past couple of weeks, to judge from the amount of work that had been done. Over by the Arch Rocks, the rancher recognized Chet Stebbins, the well driller from Oxbow, busy sinking a bore with his portable derrick. Nearby a shiny new windmill and a dismantled steel tower lay in their shipping crates alongside the well site.

Off to the left, a Conestoga prairie schooner with a dingy patched hood was parked in the shade of a box alder. An even dirtier canvas tent had been pitched alongside it, and a sun-bonneted woman of middle age was helping a pretty red-haired girl hang out a washing on a line slung between a tent pole and the shade tree.

A sharp, quickening anger shaped up in Sam Branch as he pulled his gaze over the thin stand of lodgepole pines directly ahead of the team. Through the timber he could see a gray-whiskered nester with the flat-brimmed black hat of a Mormon elder busy falling timber.

Two strapping boys in their late 'teens

were working at the edge of the stand of pines. They had bucked a sizable rick of peeled logs into eighteen-foot lengths, and their intended use was plain to the man in the buckboard. Each log had been adzed flat on top and bottom and their ends were notched. Cabin timbers.

Four stakes with twine stretched taut to form a rectangle had been pegged down over by the Conestoga. The implication was too clear to be questioned. They marked the floor plan of a proposed log cabin.

THIS last settled the brief indecision in Sam Branch's mind. This wasn't a sodbuster family drifting through the open range in search of a homestead site, trespassers who could be sent on their way with a courteous warning. The well they were having drilled and the logs they were shaping for a cabin proved that these Saints were up from Utah to stay.

Well, the business end of a Winchester could do the arguing for Sam Branch. No land-grabbing squatters could unload a reel of bobwire or touch a plowshare to Circle B sod as long as Winchester law ruled the cattle country.

With a soft oath, Sam Branch whipped his team down the ridge and hauled up at the edge of the pines. He wrapped the lines around the whipsocket and climbed over the seat to where his double-rigged stock saddle lay beside the tarp-covered corpse. There was a .30-30 carbine in the saddle scabbard and after Branch had levered a shell into the breech he climbed over the tail gate.

His deep-chested Arabian black, trailing the wagon at the end of a hackamore, nuzzled his shoulder as Sam Branch paused to stare thoughtfully at the motionless form under the canvas fly.

Driving across the open prairie toward the county seat had been Branch's way of avoiding the county road which would have taken him through Oxbow, something he didn't care to do in broad daylight. Now it seemed as if his wagon had been guided to this remote corner of the Circle B by a benevolent fate, otherwise weeks could have elapsed before he would have learned of the invasion of these sodbusters in land he had sworn would never know a fence post or a furrow.

Cradling the Winchester under one arm, Branch loosened the Colt .44 in its holster thonged against his right thigh. He cut through the pine motte, jaw out-thrust like a block of granite, steel-gray eyes slitted by the anger which was pumping through his veins.

Emerging from the trees, Branch scowled as he saw that the Mormons had built themselves a barbed wire corral to hold a string of saddle horses and a pair of oxen. Two gate posts had been sunk in the gumbo and forming an arch across the top was a whipsawed plank on which a crude sign had been lettered with charcoal: RAINBOW'S END FARM.

The sodbuster and his two sons were oblivious to Branch's approach as they watched a fifty-foot pine topple with a noisy crash beyond the rick of cabin logs.

"A fine ridgepole she will make, lads," the whiskered oldster remarked, mopping his bald pate with a bandanna. "A sod roof and a puncheon floor, and by the Grace of our Heavenly Father we will have a home in this happy land."

The click of Branch's Winchester hammer coming to full cock brought the three Saints wheeling around to stare at the tall, rangy cowman at the edge of the corral.

"Fixing on staying awhile, gents?"

Branch's greetings was sharp-edged with a hostility he made no effort to conceal.

The old man nodded slowly, moving up to stand between his strapping six-foot sons. All three, Branch noted, packed guns.

"Howdy, friend. Yeah, I reckon we're here to stay." He gestured toward the young giants beside him. "My name is Jebediah Gilroy. These are my sons, Chuck and Radd. We came overland from Utah."

Sensing the menace of Branch's taut posture and steely silence, the old man went on with a gentle smile: "Welcome to Rainbow's End, stranger."

Branch shook his head slowly. "You came to the wrong place to find your pot

of gold, Gilroy. This basin is private range, not public domain subject to homesteading. When I come back from town around noon, I'll expect to see you have pulled stakes and rolled your wagon."

Jeb Gilroy scratched a sunken cheek thoughtfully. Chuck and Radd had dropped their tools, a slow defiance rutting their whiskerless faces as they digested Branch's ultimatum.

"We are peaceable folk, not trespassers," Gilroy said firmly. "We bought and paid for a section of ground here in Quaker Basin. We have a deed to prove it."

Astonishment held Branch's temper in check for a long moment.

"What's that?" he blurted out, finally. "Who sold you this land?"

A benevolent amusement glinted in the Mormon's eyes.

"Why, the man who owned it, naturally," he said. "A rancher who owns the Circle B iron. A man named Samuel Branch."

BRANCH lowered the stock of his carbine to the ground and pulled a long breath across his teeth. The sincerity of Gilroy's words ruled out any possibility that the Saint was ribbing him.

"What kind of a looking feller was this Sam Branch?" he demanded. "Where did you run across him?"

Gilroy fingered his spade beard thoughtfully, showing no offense at Branch's truculent tone.

"Branch is a chunky-built, red-haired man around forty. Has smallpox scars over his face, and a ram's horn mustache. I thought everyone in this part of Wyoming knew Sam Branch."

Sam Branch digested this information in silence. The description did not fit anyone in Lodgepole County, so far as he knew. Then he asked in a restrained monotone which hinted of a close-curbed anger: "I'd like to see that deed, if you don't mind."

The Mormon blinked. Defiance kindled in his rheumy orbs for a brief instant before being displaced by a slow grin.

"Glad to, stranger. It's over at the tent."

The four of them moved past the corral and through the pines, held silent by an armistice of clashing wills as they passed the buckboard. Gilroy and his sons read the gilt letters painted across the wagon box: MORRIS CLAYPOOL, ATTORNEY AT LAW.

This stranger didn't appear to be a lawyer. He wore the cleft-crown Stetson of a cowboy, and a cowboy's spurred star boots and saddle-shiny levis encasing saddle-warped legs. Jeb Gilroy appraised him as being close to thirty, with a sun-bronzed skin that did not seem to go with a cow country lawyer.

They reached the tent where the two women were busy at their wash tubs and Sam Branch lifted his broad-rimmed hat in response to old Jeb's introduction.

"My wife Lizzie and our daughter Esta. Ma, this is, er, Mister Claypool, I reckon. He's a lawyer checkin' on our right to built a home here. Mebbe you're the county assessor?"

Receiving no answer, Gilroy ducked out of sight inside the tent, leaving Branch to stare self-consciously at the Mormon women. Mrs. Gilroy was a scrawny, work-worn woman close to fifty, wearing a faded challie sacque and gingham apron. Her straggly gray hair was tucked under a bonnet which was peculiar to the Mormon's austere fashion.

Esta was something else again, a girl to catch any man's eye. She was around twenty, Branch judged, her body slim and athletic but rounded by the first bloom of maturity. She wore a linsey-woolsey shirt tucked into a pair of man's corduroy pants, and her hair, cascading to her shoulders in rich waves, was a rare mahogany shade of shimmering auburn.

"Trouble, Pa?" the nester's wife queried anxiously, wiping her soap-reddened hands on her apron as Gilroy emerged from the tent with a cigar box in his hands.

"I reckon not, Lizzie," the oldster reassured her. "This deed will prove our title to Mr. Claypool, I reckon."

Branch accepted a piece of paper which Jeb Gilroy fished out of the cigar box. As he unfolded it, he ran his eye around the Mormon camp. This was a

dirt-poor family, gaunted by poverty and years of hard work, facts testified by their clean but shabby clothing, their run-down wagon and other gear.

Branch scanned the paper Gilroy had given him. It was a deed executed two weeks previously in the county seat, Gypsum Butte, and indicated that Samuel Branch had sold a section of the Circle B, described by metes and bounds to encompass the area of Quaker Basin, for the sum of one hundred dollars. The signature, Sam Branch, had been forged clumsily across the bottom of the deed.

"You got this section cheap enough, folks," Branch commented, some of the edge dulling from his voice. "Practically a gift."

Esta moved closer to him. When she spoke her voice held a low, eager excitement like a little girl exclaiming over a new toy.

"It's the first break of luck God has willed us in ten years, sir. Blackleg and drought drove us out of Utah. We were hunting for a donation land claim to file on here in Wyoming Territory when this Mr. Branch offered to let us buy this basin."

Mrs. Gilroy spoke up in a reedy, quavering voice: "We've never seen a more heavenly spot on earth, Mr. Claypool. That's why we named it Rainbow's End. It means an end to our roaming across the face of the earth, a chance to settle down and live in peace according to God's law."

SOMETHING of the menace faded from Sam Branch's eyes as he absorbed the relief and ecstasy in the women's words. No greedy land-grabbers, these Latter-Day Saints. They were respectable people, hounded by bad luck, and the hundred dollars they had paid for this six hundred and forty acres of barren ground was probably all the cash they had in the world.

"Is—is our title in order, Mr. Claypool?" old Jeb cut into his thoughts. "We don't want to take any chances on a cloudy title, knowing how the cattlemen around here hate to see farmers move in."

One of the boys spoke up with quick emphasis, "This ground is worthless for stock. But we can irrigate and make Quaker Basin bloom like a rose, same as Brigham Young and our people have done in the Salt Lake desert."

Sam Branch tongued his cheek thoughtfully.

"This deed appears to be O.K.," he answered after a weighty pause. "Except it lacks a notary's seal. I'll take care of that for you in a jiffy."

So saying, Branch leaned his .30-30 against a water barrel and strode off up the slope toward his waiting buckboard.

Arriving at the end gate, Branch glanced around to make sure the Mormons hadn't followed him. There was a carpetbag inside the wagon and from it Branch took a notorial seal. He affixed it to one corner of the deed, scrawled a few words there and added the name of Morris Claypool, notary public for Lodgepole County. He made the date jibe with the one on the deed.

When he returned to where the Gilroys had gathered in front of their tent, he handed the paper to old Jeb and picked up his rifle, a bleak smile on his lips.

"No charge for my services," he waved off the nester's proffered greenback. "I'd advise you to record this at the county seat as soon as possible."

As he turned to leave, young Radd spoke up eagerly: "We were fixing to go deer hunting this afternoon over in the Warbonnets," he said. "Lay in a supply of meat. You know anything about how the game is over in them mountains, mister?"

Sam Branch grinned.

"See that notch under the peaks?" he asked, gesturing toward the staggered purple skyline to westward. "Wildrose Creek runs through that pass. I got a herd of thoroughbred horses summering up in Wildrose Canyon. Yesterday I saw a herd of elk up on the bench above the waterfall."

A few moments later the democrat wagon rattled across their camp, heading over the Basin flats toward Gypsum Butte. Sam Branch waved a greeting to Chet Stebbins, the well driller, and then whipped his mules into a jogging trot to disappear beyond the stratified outcrop of the Arch Rocks.

It was not until noon, when Chet Stebbins came over to camp for his mid-day meal with the Gilroys, that the Mormon family learned who their rifle-toting visitor was. Sam Branch, owner of the Circle B spread, who together with other Wyoming cattlemen had made no secret of their intention to keep sodbusters from encroaching on their fenceless domain, even if they had to invoke Winchester law for nesters.

CHAPTER II

Business in Gypsum Butte

SAM BRANCH tooled the buckboard wagon into the county seat around mid-morning, approaching Gypsum Butte across the open sage flats from the southwest.

The same caution that had brought him across country to avoid the cowtown of Oxbow and the main-traveled road was with Branch as he chose an obscure side street leading into the town and pulled into the alley behind Jud Beck's furniture store. In addition to his store, Beck was the county coroner.

Branch backed the wagon against the platform behind the annex which served Beck as a combination morgue and undertaking parlor. He climbed out of the wagon and hauled his saddle over the side, carrying it back to the Arabian saddle horse.

He saddled the stallion and racked it out front, then entered the store and propped his rifle behind a rack of buggy whips. He found the coroner in the back room uncrating a shipment of coffins.

"Howdy, Sam!" Beck greeted him over a handshake. "Ain't seen you in Butte for a month of Sundays. How come you ain't out with the boys making your spring beef gather?"

Branch pulled back his left sleeve to reveal a bandage there.

"Broke my arm three-four weeks ago when my black went hock-deep in a gopher hole and piled me into a rock," he explained, buttoning up the cuff. "Doc won't let me handle a rope or brandin' iron yet a spell so I'm chief roustabout out on the home spread."

Branch helped the coroner uncrate a pine casket before getting around to the mission that had brought him to the county seat.

"Morris Claypool died around 3:30 this morning over at my place, Jud. I got his body out in Claypool's wagon."

Jud Beck, callous as he was to death, could not hide the shock he felt at the news. Morris Claypool was an old-timer in Gypsum Butte, the only lawyer in this section of Wyoming.

"Sorry to hear that, Sam. Must have been his heart. Doc Casey's been warning him about angina for quite a spell."

While they were loading the dead lawyer on a litter and bringing him into the morgue, Branch explained how Claypool had stayed overnight at the Circle B, helping Branch assemble facts for a lawsuit pending against him over water rights.

"Claypool was sleeping in my spare bunk," Branch went on. "He woke me up coughing and fighting his blankets. Just before he died he gasped out something about my looking into his private safe, here in town. And he had this little bottle clutched in his fist when he passed on."

Branch handed Beck a small green bottle, bearing the label of Ward Krodie's apothecary shop in Oxbow.

"Digitalis," Jud Beck commented. "Cardiac stimulant. Could be Morris took an overdose last night."

Branch sucked at the brown-paper cigarette between his lips.

"Claypool had something preying on his mind all the time he was at the ranch," he said thoughtfully. "This may be a wild hunch, Beck, but I'd like for you to give the old man an autopsy. Analyze this here medicine. And you might get the sheriff to take whatever legal steps are necessary to check on the contents of Claypool's safe. He was trying hard to tell me something before his ticker played out, I'm sure of that."

Jud Beck pocketed the medicine bottle, his eyes grave as he stared at the still figure on the slab. It didn't seem reasonable that Claypool had deliberately given himself a lethal dose of digitalis.

"Sure thing, Sam. If you got even

the slightest notion that Morris' death wasn't due to natural causes, it's my duty to make sure before I sign a death certificate."

Leaving Beck's establishment, Sam Branch headed across town on foot to the county courthouse. He passed the assessor's office and the courtroom and entered the dingy cubicle at the end of the hall where Lige Wilkins kept the county records.

"You'll be getting a deed to record, Lige," Branch informed the recorder. "It's to a nester named Gilroy, giving him title to a section of my range over in Quaker Basin."

Wilkins cuffed back his green eyeshade and stared at the cattleman in amazement.

"You're letting dry farmers get a foothold on Lodgepole range?" he husked out. "Coming from any rancher but you, Sam, I might believe it."

Branch shrugged, his face wearing a puzzled look.

"It's a mixed-up affair that don't make sense even to me, Lige," he confessed. "The thing is, you'll spot my signature on this deed for a rank forgery, see? I want you to enter it all the same, without putting up an argument with this Gilroy."

The county recorder made a gesture of resignation.

"It's your funeral, Sam. Heaven help you when the other Warbonnet ranchers find out you've invited bobwire an' plowshares into range that's been open to graze since time eternal."

BRANCH left the courthouse and arranged with a livery barn to pick up Claypool's buckboard and mule team. Then he returned to Jud Beck's place to get the Winchester he had left there.

Sheriff Roger Daw was back in the undertaking parlor conversing with Jud Beck when Branch entered the front of the store. Both men hurried out to confront the Circle B rider.

"Claypool was poisoned, Sam," the coroner said hoarsely. "This bottle you gave me contained strychnine tablets instead of digitalis. I haven't completed the autopsy but I would say that Claypool had enough strychnine in him to kill a dozen men."

Branch ground out his cigarette under heel and met Sheriff Daw's level stare.

"We'll check with Ward Krodie to see if his chemist made a mistake filling that prescription of Claypool's," the lawman said. "You got any idea who'd want to kill that poor old gaffer?"

A pulse raced along the bronzed column of Branch's throat.

"No more idea than you got, sheriff. Beck tell you what I said about examining Claypool's office safe?"

Daw nodded.

"We aim to do that this afternoon, Sam. Where'll we find you in case we need your testimony at an inquest?"

A few minutes later the sheriff accompanied Branch out to where he had hitched his Arabian.

Back in the saddle, Branch eyed Daw quizzically.

"Have you ever seen a chunky-built man around town who has pock marks on his face and sports a ram's horn mustache, sheriff? A red-haired jasper, around forty?"

The lawman fingered the badge pinned to his suspender for a moment, eyes squinted in thought.

"Why, that could be Jake Chalkley, I reckon," Daw answered. "Feller I've seed off and on around the saloons here in town. Claims to be a mustanger who hunts fuzztails over in the Warbonnets. Any reason for askin'?"

Branch fingered the chinstrap of his Stetson for a moment.

"Not especially," he said vaguely. "Except that this Jake Chalkley dabbles in real estate when he ain't corraling wild ones back in the hill country."

Leaving the sheriff to puzzle on that one, the Circle B boss curvetted the black thoroughbred away from the tie bar, and hit a long lope down the wagon road which led to Oxbow, ten miles distant.

With the county seat behind him, Branch had his first opportunity to reflect on the sudden complications which life had dealt him in the past twenty-four hours.

Morris Claypool's mysterious death out at the Circle B left him with a law suit pending and no counsel to represent his case in court. He pushed out of

his head any belief that Claypool had been murdered to prevent him from arguing Circle B's stand on the water right case when it came to court next month.

The plaintiff in the action was a neighboring rancher, a friend rather than an enemy of Branch's. The pending litigation was merely to clear up title to range which Branch's father had owned for a generation, land involving the headwaters of Wildrose Creek which the neighboring rancher claimed prior title to under a homestead claim dating back to Branch's boyhood. Whatever the outcome of the lawsuit, Branch did not stand to lose much.

Then there was this matter of finding a Mormon family from Utah squatting on Circle B range out in Quaker Basin. If this wild-horse hunter, Jake Chalkley, had been the impostor responsible for selling the Gilroys a section for a measly one hundred dollars, what was his motive? Chalkley would hardly risk arrest for forgery and obtaining money under false pretenses, just for a hundred dollars. A man could win or lose that much in a poker game and think nothing of it.

Something deeper, more sinister lay back of this illegal sale of Circle B land to a nester, Sam Branch believed.

Probing deep for an explanation for his own actions out at Gilroy's camp this morning, Branch could find none. Gilroy was a friendly old Mormon, a trusting soul who would have pulled his picket pin readily enough if he learned that he and his family had been the victim of a hoax. One word from Sam Branch—

Yet he had OK'd the deed, even to the point of authenticating the document with a dead man's notorial seal. Maybe he had been swayed by a pair of amber eyes and a head of auburn hair, Branch decided—that, and old Lizzie Gilroy's passionate thanksgiving over God's leading them to ground they regarded as a bit of heaven on earth—Rainbow's End.

THE sun was westering in his eyes when Sam Branch rode into Oxbow. The town was smaller than the county seat, a scattered collection of saloons and false-fronted stores and honkies and livery stables, owing its existence to the fact that it was a railhead where outlaying cattlemen drove their beef to the loading pens for shipment to Omaha and Chicago.

Branch reined up for a moment before the small board-and-bat shanty which bore the mortar and pestle sign of an apothecary's shop. The business belonged to Ward Krodie, Oxbow's leading citizen, and it was here that Morris Claypool had obtained, by tragic accident or murderous design, the poison which had proved fatal to him.

Ground-hitching his black, Sam Branch entered the drugstore, his nostrils savoring the redolent odors of herbs and unguents, patent medicines and other chemicals which formed a multi-colored bank of bottles from floor to ceiling.

The pharmacist on duty was not Ward Krodie, but a pasty-faced outlander whom Branch knew by name only.

"Bottle of screw-worm dope," he told the clerk. When he got the veterinary salve and paid for it, he asked casually, "Ward Krodie out back?"

The druggist gestured off through the front window.

"The boss don't handle his drug business any more to speak of. You'll find him over at the feed barn most likely."

Branch paused at the front door, debating whether to question the prescription man regarding the medicine he might or might not have compounded for Morris Claypool the day before. Then he decided to let the sheriff handle that business. If the lawyer's death proved to have been murder, it was Roger Daw's business to track down the source of the poison.

Back in stirrups, Branch headed toward the railroad tracks and pulled up in front of Krodie's headquarters, a huge granary where the speculator stored feed for the stock he trafficked in.

Ward Krodie was something of a mystery in Oxbow. He had arrived in the cowtown twelve years before, well heeled with cash which he had multiplied through a rare judgment in speculating on the beef market. In the brief

span of a decade, Krodie had expanded from a two-bit cowtown druggist and cattle broker into something of a land baron as well.

Besides extensive holdings of leased graze, Krodie held mortgages on the town's two largest saloons, its mercantile store and the shipping pens. Trading in horses and cattle had become the speculator's chief interest of later years, but through some inherent distrust of the man, Sam Branch had never dealt with him, preferring the longer trail drive to Cheyenne.

Entering the front office, Branch found Krodie at his desk. The speculator glanced up, grinning as he recognized his visitor.

"Long time no see, Branch. How's the busted arm coming along?"

Oxbow's most influential citizen dressed the part, wearing a black fustian town coat, bed-of-flowers vest and fancy California pants foxed with buckskin and tucked into shiny cavalry boots. He was rarely without a gun, and a rosewood-butted Frontier .45 was strapped to his thigh today.

"So-so—enough to keep me away from the spring calf gather," Branch grunted. "Krodie, you know them thoroughbred Arabs I've got on summer pasture up in the Warbonnets?"

Krodie's eyes flashed with interest. He pulled a panatella cigar from his waistcoat, offered it to Branch, who declined.

For years, Ward Krodie had sought to buy the thoroughbred horses which the Circle B bred as a sideline, but without success.

"Of course I know about the herd, Sam," Krodie grinned. "You know I'm prepared to offer you above market price for any Arabians sired by Circle B studs." He paused, curbing his eagerness. "How many you care to dispose of?"

Branch shook his head, his mind busy on the angles of this thing. If Krodie had any place in this mixed-up business of Jake Chalkley and the deed to Quaker Basin, it might be hard to track down.

"I got no thoroughbreds for sale," he said evasively, "but I do have an offer. From a mustanger named Jake Chalkley. I wondered if you knew the man?"

Krodie lit a lucifer match, fired his cigar and blew out the flame before answering.

"Chalkley . . . Chalkley. The name ain't familiar to me, Sam. If he's a mustanger, I don't go in for buying fuzztails as a rule."

AS IF the answer concluded his business with Krodie, Branch turned toward the door. Krodie came to his feet, hitching at the cartridge belt which circled his paunch.

"Jest a minute, Sam," the speculator drawled unctuously. "Been intending to ask you if you've been over on the north end of your spread lately?"

Branch paused, his heart hammering like a mallet. Quaker Basin was on the north end of the Circle B.

"Not for several months," he lied. "Why'd you ask?"

Krodie teetered on the balls of his feet, bottle-green eyes surveying the rancher obliquely.

"That end of your range is too dry for graze. Might be O.K. for wheat farming, though. Ever thought of that?"

Branch's mouth twisted in what might have been a grin.

"You know where I stand on sodbusters invading Lodgepole County, Ward. I hope you're not hinting that you aim to sell any of your land to nesters."

Krodie's eyes held a bantering amusement.

"Not me, son. I thought maybe you had—seeing as how there is a family of Mormon sodbusters fixing to put Quaker Basin to the plow."

Branch jerked his body erect in well-feigned amazement.

"Sodbusters? On Circle B land?"

Krodie nodded.

"I rode past the Quaker three-four days ago on my way back from the county seat. There's a batch of Saints drilling a well on your land, falling trees to build themselves a cabin. They looked like they were moving in permanent, Sam."

Branch gave his gun belt a sharp hitch. His eyes narrowed to smouldering slits.

"Thanks for the tip, Krodie!" he said grimly. "I'll light a shuck over to Quaker Basin this afternoon. No squatters are going to roost on my range very long."

The grin faded slowly from Ward Krodie's mouth as he watched his visitor stride out to his horse, hit the stirrups, and spur down the street to halt in front of the Pioneer Mercantile another of Krodie's flourishing enterprises here in Oxbow.

Inside the store, Branch ordered two boxes of .30-30 shells and a box of .44s for his Walker pistol.

"Goin' huntin', Sam?" inquired Fred Foley, wrapping up his purchase in a newspaper. Foley was the trader who ran the Pioneer for Krodie.

"Yeah, sodbuster hunting," Branch snapped, paying for the cartridges and taking his change. "Aim to get me three-four plowboy scalps."

Branch slammed the front door behind him, grinning to himself. What he had told Fred Foley would get back to Krodie within the hour, he knew.

In the act of stowing his package in a saddle pocket, Branch heard his name called and turned to see Ben Jacobs, the grizzled old marshal of Oxbow, crossing the board walk toward him. The two were friends of long standing.

"Ben," Sam Branch asked after the amenities had been disposed of, "when you were a kid and your ma had a pie cooling on the back porch, how would you go about stealing it? Knowing your ma was working in the kitchen where she could keep an eye on that pie?"

The old lawman chuckled, wondering what deep mystery lay back of Branch's obscure question.

"Well," Jacobs drawled, "I reckon I'd go around to the front door and knock good and loud, to draw ma out of the kitchen. Then I'd run around to the back porch and lift that pie while she was in the front end of the house."

Branch swung into stirrups, his face rutting with hard lines.

"Exactly the way I figgered a pie should be stole," he said enigmatically. "You know, marshal, I got the distinct impression that Ward Krodie just got through knocking good and loud on my front door."

CHAPTER III

Rustlers on the Wildrose

ABOUT two miles out of Oxbow, Sam Branch reined off the section line road which led north out of town and spurred to the crest of Signal Hump, an eroded lava formation which formed the only elevation between Oxbow and the Warbonnets.

The Hump got its name from Indian-war days when U. S. Army signal corpsmen had used it as a lookout post and heliograph station. From its peak, Branch was in a position to see any riders who left Oxbow, either trailing him or bound elsewhere.

He hipped over in saddle and built a smoke, using the respite to unravel the hazy idea that had taken shape in his brain following his interview with Ward Krodie.

Maybe he was imagining things, but the off-handed way that Krodie had brought up the Quaker Basin nesters struck Branch as a deliberate trick to bait him into riding out to the north end of his spread.

Was the Oxbow speculator trying to stir up gun trouble between him and the sodbusters? The answer to that one brought Sam Branch's trend of thought back to his analogy about the pie on the back porch.

Was Krodie baiting him to the far end of his spread so that he could engineer a little pie-stealing, knowing that the Circle B home ranch was deserted while the crew was over in the Warbonnets rounding up and branding the spring calf crop?

If so, the "pie" that Krodie might have an eye to stealing would be the hundred-odd head of thoroughbred Arabian stallions and brood mares which Branch had wintered in a box canyon over on Wildrose Creek, within view of the Circle B ranchhouse.

Breeding thoroughbred horses was a hobby of Branch's, one which was profitable for Arabians were a rarity in the West, and a ready market could be found for them. Only the fact that wild mustangs ranged the outskirts of the

Circle B had kept Branch from thinking seriously of converting his spread into a horse-breeding range, and discontinuing his cattle business entirely.

But at the rate the wild stuff was multiplying back in the Warbonnets and as far north as the Bighorns and the Tetons, there was too much danger of interbreeding by scrub stallions to make thoroughbred raising commercially feasible.

Squinting off through the thin stand of quaking aspens which wigged the crown of Signal Hump, Sam Branch focussed his eyes on the remote outlines of Oxbow, shimmering in a brown blot on the sun-dancing horizon.

Something bright and blinding was flashing through the heat haze, centered on the cowtown. Branch watched the pulsating cadence of the flashes for a long interval, before unbuckling a saddlepocket and drawing out his field glasses.

Training the binoculars on Oxbow, Branch resolved the flickering light into a sheet of bright galvanized tin which revolved on a vertical axis from the roof of Ward Krodie's feed barn.

He knew the sheet of tin on the ridgepole was a device to scare birds away from Krodie's open grain bins. But there was not a breath of air stirring today, to make that scarecrow spin.

Could it be that the axle was being revolved by hand, from inside the loft of Krodie's barn? If so, the bright metal vane could serve as a heliograph capable of sending its glittering flashes to the remotest horizon. Soldiers in bygone days of Sioux uprising had used a heliograph mirror to send messages as far as fifty miles from the very spot where Branch sat his horse here on Signal Hump.

Thoughts raced through Branch's head as he cased the binoculars. Suppose the scarecrow on Krodie's barn was a signaling device. Suppose persons interested in seeing those signal flashes were watching from the rocky fastnesses of the Warbonnet Range above the canyon where Branch's herd of Arabians were grazing.

The herd was protected by a lone cowpuncher, Shorty Malone, who camped in the line cabin at the mouth of Wildrose Canyon. If Krodie had rustlers hidden on the mountain slopes, awaiting a signal from Oxbow that Sam Branch was not on the home ranch where he could keep an eye on the box canyon, then Shorty Malone might be in peril right this minute.

BRANCH wheeled his black Arabian around and rolled his spurs, sending the magnificent stallion at a long lope down the opposite slope of Signal Hump.

He headed across his own range in a beeline for the Arabian holding ground on the Wildrose, passing up the side road which would lead him to his home ranch. The Circle B was deserted, with cook and wranglers and cowboys out in the foothills popping the brush for the spring roundup of unbranded calves.

Sunset was flaming beyond the western mountains when Sam Branch hit Wildrose Creek five miles downstream from the pasture fence built across the mouth of the canyon where the Arabians grazed.

Blue dusk was crawling down the canyon-gashed slopes of the Warbonnet foothills as he moved up the willow-fringed creek, heading for the line camp shack where Shorty Malone would probably be rustling up his evening snack about now.

A slim sickle of butter-yellow moon lifted its horns over the horizon above Quaker Valley as Sam Branch caught sight of the square of lamplight which marked the window of Shorty's cabin, built at the foot of the granite cliffs which formed the north shoulder of the canyon mouth. A ledge trail sloped up from the rear of the cabin, giving access to the mountain meadows higher up.

Woodsmoke wafted to the cowman's nostrils as he reached the barbed wire fence which kept his thoroughbreds from straying out of their pasture. Embarrassment needled Branch as he realized that his fears were probably groundless. His imagination must have been playing him tricks. It was entirely possible that a vagrant whirlwind had set Krodie's scarecrow to spinning down in Oxbow this afternoon, that it wasn't a signal at all.

He was following the barbed wire

fence toward the south, counting the posts which would lead him to the gate, when a harsh voice challenged him from the dark backdrop of salt cedars rimming Wildrose Creek.

"That you, Chub? How come you're outside the fence?"

Branch's black snorted nervously. The Circle B man drew up the slack of his reins and palmed his Walker .44, waiting for some movement to reveal his challenger's location.

"Halt up, busky!" came the voice again, sharp with menace and followed by the oily click of a rifle lever pumping a shell into the breech.

The voice directed Branch's eye to the far side of the gate. Moonlight reflecting off Wildrose Creek silhouetted a sombreroed rider mounted on a horse there. His same glance revealed to Sam Branch that the gate had been pulled wide open.

Branch reined up. Before he could answer the sentinel, flame spat from a .30-30 muzzle and a steel-jacketed missile scorched the under side of Branch's Stetson brim, inches from his left ear.

Steadying his gun barrel across the swellfork, Branch squeezed off an answering shot, aiming at the muzzle flash. He heard the sodden thud of his bullet catching the horseman high on one shoulder.

Blended with the guard's bawl of pain was a second roar of a rifle shot, the bullet whining high over head this time.

Sam Branch whipped up his .44, aiming with cold precision at the wounded rider. He pulled trigger, felt the Walker buck savagely against the crotch of his thumb.

Echoes of the gunshots slapped back and forth up the canyon walls. Peering through the spectral moonlight, Branch saw the gate guard drop his rifle with a clatter on the rocks, then slide soddenly out of stirrups.

The outlaw's horse spooked then, stampeding down the creek toward the open range with saddle leather flopping. Spurring forward, Sam Branch's ears caught a growing rumble of hoof-beats funneling down between the rimrocks of Wildrose Canyon. He knew what that meant. Rustlers were hazing his thoroughbreds out of the gorge.

He dismounted in front of the open gate and stood a moment over the sprawled body of the man he had shot, turning the limp corpse over with a boot toe. The moonrays revealed the twisted bleeding visage of a man he had never seen before.

Leading his own black inside the fence, Sam Branch pulled the wire gate shut and fastened it. Then he hauled his Winchester carbine out of the saddle boot and headed for the lamplighted cabin, turning the Arabian loose.

His shouts brought no answer from Shorty Malone, and a sense of panic put a chill through Sam Branch. Reaching the wide-open doorway of the line camp soddy, he saw why his wrangler had not responded to his shouts.

Shorty Malone, a kid in his early twenties, was sprawled face down in front of the cookstove where coffee was boiling and a kettle of beans were scorching to a crisp.

Malone had been shot twice in the back of the head, probably by the gunman down by the gate who had stood in this open doorway while Malone was cooking his supper.

The thunder of the approaching horse herd was increasing in volume now. To Branch's ears came the shouting voices of at least two rustlers, heading the thoroughbreds down the creek. He wondered if the rustlers had heard the brief exchange of gunfire down by the gate.

Sam Branch made his decision then. The stampeding herd would be halted when it reached the closed gate, and from the sanctuary of the line camp shack, Branch believed he could tally the rustlers in the moonlight, even against heavy odds.

He crossed the threshold, eyes blinking against the glare of Shorty Malone's Coleman lantern, hanging from a peeled-pole ceiling beam.

Branch slammed the door shut and headed toward the lamp, intending to douse the light. From the front window of the cabin, his rifle could command the narrow bottleneck exit of the canyon.

In the act of reaching for the lamp, a harsh voice behind him arrested Branch: "Elevate, feller. You're under

a cold drop."

Hands frozen on his Winchester, Sam Branch turned slowly to face the direction of Shorty's bunk. Crouched against the wall between the bunk and the front door was a squatty-built figure with a shock of flaming red hair, a bushy ram's horn mustache and a leering visage disfigured with smallpox scars.

The outlaw held a Colt .45 in either hand, their bores trained on the Circle B rider's chest.

Branch lowered the carbine, setting it carefully on the table under the lamp. Then he raised his arms to the level of his Stetson brim.

"Howdy, Jake Chalkley," he bit out. "I wondered if you was behind this rustling deal tonight."

CHAPTER IV

Gunsmoke Showdown

CHALKLEY'S heavy brows lifted in momentary surprise. Then he stalked forward, nostrils flaring to his heavy breathing. He lifted the Walker .44 out of Branch's holster and tossed it over on Malone's bunk. Then, in the act of reaching for the rifle on the table, Chalkley saw the name burned into the walnut stock. Sam Branch.

"You the owner of them hot bloods out yonder, feller?" the red-headed mustang hunter asked sharply.

The cowman hesitated, debating his chances of driving a haymaker to Chalkley's jaw without taking a point-black slug in the middle. He summed up his chances as impossible.

"What's the difference who I am?"

Chalkley shrugged, backing off out of range of Branch's fists.

"It could make plenty difference to you, son. You might be a passin' saddle tramp who blundered into a mess by mistake. If you're Shorty Malone's boss, I reckon I got to kill you."

The thud of hoof beats approaching the line camp cabin made a deafening racket. Jake Chalkley remained rigid, an ear cocked toward the open door as he heard the Arabian herd thunder past the cabin, then start milling before the closed fence.

Excited shouts came out of the night. Then two riders spurred away from the thoroughbreds and headed for the cabin. Branch heard the squeak of saddle leather as the rustlers dismounted, then the jingle of spur chains as they headed for the open door.

Two riders with guns at their hips and coiled lass-ropes slung over their arms appeared on the threshold, blinking in the light. One of them was a scrawny saddle bum who had worked for the Circle B the winter before, a man named Ed Haynes. His companion was a stranger to Branch, a towering giant with the high cheek bones and coarse black hair which hinted of Indian blood.

"What's up, Jake?" demanded Haynes. "The gate's closed and Slim Hart's sprawled in the dirt, dead as a tick in sheep dip."

Haynes and the quarter-breed moved into the cabin then, catching sight of Sam Branch held under the menace of Chalkley's gun drop.

"This hombre tallied Slim four-five minutes ago, Ed. So far as I know, he rode up here alone. I waited for him to show up at the cabin here."

Ed Haynes' mouth twisted in a cruel grin as he stared at Branch.

"This hombre is Sam Branch," Haynes grunted. "Smoke him down and let's get out of here, Jake. I don't like the way the cards are fallin'."

Sam Branch glanced around desperately. His rifle was the nearest weapon to hand, but a move toward it would bring leaden doom streaking his way.

Jake Chalkley cocked his six-gun, drawing a bead on Branch's midriff. His eyes held the glint of a man to whom cold-blooded murder would be an easy thing.

"Just a second, Chalkley!" Branch panted hoarsely, stalling for time. "Before you drop that hammer, there's one thing I'd like to know. . . . Did Ward Krodie signal you from Oxbow this afternoon that I wouldn't be on this end of Circle B range?"

Chalkley gave no tell-tale start of surprise. He licked his lips, darting a glance at Ed Haynes and the breed.

"Drop the son and let's get going, Jake!" rasped the black-haired outlaw.

Chalkley turned angrily toward his henchman.

"Shut up, Chub. I'm thinking maybe we'd ought to hold Branch hostage, just in case he's got us trapped with a bunch of Circle B cowpokes outside the canyon."

Chub snarled an oath and drew his own gun.

THIS was it, Branch knew. He lowered his arms slightly, turning to meet the menace of Chub's leveled Colt, his flesh crawling against the expected impact of a bullet.

Interruption came then from a totally unexpected quarter. Glass jangled from a smashed out window behind Sam Branch and a .45-70 barrel slid across the sill, its muzzle leveled at Jake Chalkley and the two rustlers behind him.

"Reach, the four of ye!" came a steely voice from outside the window, a voice that held a faintly familiar ring to Branch's ear. "We got this shack surrounded."

Chub leaped for the shelter of the cookstove, thumbing a quick shot at the unseen rifleman. The .45-70 exploded with ear-shattering violence and Chub crashed headlong into a woodbox, blood founting from a bullet hole in his temple.

Sam Branch flung himself to a squat as Jake Chalkley jerked triggers. Twin .45 slugs ripped through thin air where Branch had been standing.

He pulled the Winchester carbine off the table and squeezed trigger, swinging the barrel toward Chalkley in the same motion.

His bullet caught the boss rustler in the chest, dumping him on his back, his spurred boots beating a tattoo on the floor puncheons.

Through pluming gunsmoke, Ed Haynes turned and raced for the open doorway. Criss-crossing lead cut him down before he had taken a step toward his waiting saddle horse, as gunmen opened fire from either end of the cabin.

Sam Branch came to his feet, vaulting over Chalkley's writhing body. He saw Haynes' lead-riddled corpse sprawled on the rubble where the shaft of lampshine laid a rectangular pattern on the ground outside the door.

It was all over. Rescue had come as if by a miracle to Sam Branch, here in this remote canyon shack.

Boots grated on rubble as two men approached the front door from opposite ends of the cabin.

"Hold your fire, Mister Branch!" warned a youthful voice. "We're friends."

Branch knew the truth then. The two men were Chuck and Radd Gilroy, moving into the glow of lamplight with their deer rifles held at the ready. Old Jeb, then, would be the man with the .45-70 at the back window.

"We were camped on the rim above the shack here, Mister Branch," Chuck Gilroy explained. "Aimed to get us a few elk on the bench above that waterfall you told us about, come morning. When we seen somebody was stealing your horses, we come down the ledge to investigate."

Jeb Gilroy came around the corner of the cabin then, carrying his .45-70. With him was the slim figure of Esta.

Before Branch could greet his rescuers, he heard a moan behind him, inside the shack. He whirled around, strode back indoors to see Jake Chalkley plucking at the bullet hole in his shirt with palsied fingers.

The Gilroys came into the death-charged cabin as they saw the Circle B boss squat beside the outlaw.

"Your sand is running out fast, Chalkley," he said, peering down at the outlaw's pock-pitted face. "If Ward Krodie paid you to rustle my thoroughbreds tonight, tell me. I'll square your score with Krodie, I promise you that."

Chalkley's eyes flickered open, bright as polished bullet tips. Crimson bubbles swelled and burst on the corners of his mouth as he struggled to speak.

"Go—to the devil—Branch. Luck . . . run yore way . . . tonight."

A paroxysm of coughing seized the dying outlaw, and when it was finished Branch saw death throw a glazed film over the mustang hunter's eyeballs. A rattle gurgled itself out in Chalkley's throat, and it was over.

Branch got to his feet, turning to face the Mormons grouped in the doorway.

"I owe you my life, folks," the Circle B rancher said slowly. "Ain't there something in the Bible about casting your bread on the waters and it'll float back to you?"

Esta Gilroy came forward, staring at Chalkley's corpse.

"This—this man was the one who claimed to be you, Mr. Branch," the girl said. "It was he who sold us that land in Quaker Basin. Why—why didn't you tell us this morning when you visited Rainbow's End?"

Sam Branch felt an odd thrill surge through him as he met the girl's eyes.

"It's like your brother said this morning, ma'am. The time will come when dry farmers will whittle into Wyoming range. Let's say that I realized the inevitable and wanted to choose my neighbors, shall we?"

Jeb Gilroy shook his head, a fierce pride lighting his face.

"We ain't looking for handouts, Mr. Branch. Come morning, we'll hitch up our wagon and get off your land."

Sam Branch laughed softly. It occurred to him in that moment that he wanted these Mormons for neighbors more than anything else in the world.

"You saved my life tonight," he repeated doggedly. "Suppose we call that ample payment for a section of land that my stock couldn't graze on anyhow?"

THEY buried the dead rustlers next morning down by the creek. When the Gilroys had headed back into the Warbonnets to resume their elk hunting expedition, Sam Branch loaded Shorty Malone's body on a buckskin and headed for the Circle B, intending to give his wrangler decent burial there.

It was noon when he got there, and he was surprised to see three saddle horses hitched at the rack in front of his ranchhouse.

He carried Shorty Malone out to the bunkhouse, turned the two saddle horses into the corral and headed for the house. It was not until he was going up the path toward the porch that he recognized his visitors.

Seated on cowhide chairs under the wooden awning of the porch were Ward Krodie and two of his stockyard men, Dick Jessup and Tubby Ford. All three men were armed, but their faces wore friendly grins as Sam Branch came toward them.

"Glad to see you, Sam," Krodie called out affably. "I was beginning to wonder if you ran into trouble with those Mormons over at the Basin yesterday."

Branch shook his head, a storm of speculation raging under his John B. Jake Chalkley had given him no positive proof that Krodie was back of the abortive horse-rustling attempt at Wildrose Canyon last night. Without that proof, Branch knew it would be foolish to challenge the Oxbow speculator, especially since Krodie was backed by two gunswift riders in his own pay.

"I didn't go over to the Basin after I left Oxbow," he said slowly. "Had some trouble over on the Wildrose last night. This Jake Chalkley mustanger I told you about tried to chouse that thoroughbred cavvy of mine."

Krodie's expression did not change, his eyes fixed on Branch with an inscrutable gaze. The three men on the porch had come to their feet, and Sam Branch kept his hand close by his Walker .44.

"Sam, I came out to the Circle B this morning to make a deal with you," Krodie said, reaching under the lapel of his fustian and drawing out a thick wallet. "I want to buy Quaker Basin from you. Would fifteen thousand dollars interest you?"

A notch furrowed Branch's forehead. With Wyoming range going at five dollars an acre lately, Krodie's bid for a relatively worthless section of grassless range was entirely out of line with the speculator's reputation for driving a hard bargain.

"No dice, Krodie," Branch said after a moment. "I got no land for sale."

Krodie stared at him quizzically.

"You mean my price isn't right? Quaker Basin ain't worth the taxes you pay on it."

"Then why," Branch shot back, "are you willing to pay fifteen thousand for it?"

Krodie shrugged indifferently.

"I own the range next to the Basin on the north. I've got a buyer for the whole piece, and Quaker Basin would make a protected spot for my client and to build his barns and such."

Sam Branch came up on the porch and fanned himself with his Stetson.

"Sorry, Krodie, but you're too late. I've already sold the Basin to Jeb Gilroy —the Mormon you told me about. You'll find the transaction duly recorded at the county seat."

For the first time, Ward Krodie's mask of indifference fell away, his face purpling as he absorbed the brunt of the rancher's statement.

"You fool! You unmitigated fool!" the Oxbow speculator finally found his voice. "Come on, men. There's no use wasting our time out here."

The three men headed out to their horses. When they were mounted, he called to the Circle B rancher on the porch: "Mind telling me what Gilroy paid you for the Basin, Sam?"

Branch grinned. "One hundred dollars, Krodie. In cash."

Krodie snorted a profane rejoinder and wheeled his horse around. Tubby Ford and Dick Jessup spurred after him as they galloped out of sight beyond the barns, heading for the Oxbow road.

Branch rustled up a meal for himself, roped a fresh saddler out of his cavvy and headed out to the Warbonnets to visit the spring round up. He drew one of his punchers away from the calf-branding operations and sent him over to Wildrose Canyon to take Shorty Malone's place at the line camp cabin, and then, after a conference with his range foreman, returned home.

It was dusk when he re-entered the Circle B ranchhouse. The first thing that caught his eye when he lit the lamp in his kitchen was a sheet of paper which someone had thrust under the back door during his absence.

Frowning curiously, Sam Branch picked up the paper. It was a hastily scribbled message from the Oxbow well-drilling contractor, Chet Stebbins:

Sam, you're a fool for luck. Remember that well I was drilling for them nesters in Quaker Basin? 200 feet down I hit oil. A gusher, mind you, that wrecked my derrick and rig. Wouldn't surprise me if that whole anticline has got oil under it. By the time you get out there you'll find you got a lake of crude petroleum in Quaker Basin. I reckon this strike will bring a boom to Wyoming like the gold-rush did to Californy.

The impact of Chet Stebbins' message dizzied Sam Branch. He sat down on a kitchen chair, trying to absorb the full meaning of the well-driller's discovery, trying to analyze the epochal changes which this oil well would bring to his own destiny and to Wyoming Territory as well.

"So that's why Krodie was willin' to pay me fifteen thousand in exchange for a deed to Quaker Basin," Sam Branch muttered to himself. "He heard the news of Stebbins' striking oil and lit a shuck out here this morning to close a deal before I knew—"

And then, close on the heels of this realization, there came a rush of foreboding which sent the Circle B boss out to his horse corral at a run.

If Krodie was after Quaker Basin, he hadn't returned to Oxbow this afternoon. Right now, he was probably waiting at the Gilroy camp, waiting for the Mormon sod-busters to return from their deer hunting trip to the Warbonnets.

And, knowing Krodie's ruthlessness, Sam Branch had little doubt but that the speculator would not hesitate to commit murder to get title to Gilroy's section. . . .

Branch was riding out of the Circle B grounds when he saw two horsemen coming down the Oxbow road at a tight gallop. For an instant the cowman thought that Ward Krodie and one of his gunslammers was coming back to the Circle B. Then, as the riders drew closer, he recognized them through the gathering twilight.

Coroner Jud Beck and Sheriff Roger Daw from Gypsum Butte.

"Is Ward Krodie visiting you tonight, Sam?" the sheriff rasped out as he and the coroner reined up in a cloud of dust alongside Branch's stirrups. "His *segundo* over in Oxbow told us he had come out to the Circle B to palaver with you—"

"He was out here at noon. I got a hunch I know where he went when he left here though, Sheriff."

Jud Beck laughed hoarsely.

"We got a blacksmith to open Morris Claypool's safe this morning, Sam," the coroner said. "It seems the old lawyer knew Ward Krodie down in Texas in the old days. We found a reward dodger in Claypool's safe that branded Krodie for an owlhooter who murdered a Wells Fargo banker. That's where Krodie got the money he had when he come to Wyoming."

Before Sam Branch could speak, Sheriff Daw cut in:

"We also found out that it was Krodie who filled that heart medicine prescription for Claypool day before yesterday, Sam. I got a warrant in my pocket, to arrest Krodie for the murder of Morris Claypool. He poisoned the lawyer to keep Claypool from exposing him as a wanted killer from Texas."

Sam Branch touched his horse's flanks with steel.

"We're wasting time," he flung back over his shoulder at the two county seat officials. "I reckon you'll find Krodie over at Quaker Basin."

CHAPTER V

Black Gold

INSIDE Jeb Kilroy's tent a lantern converted the canvas structure into a glowing, translucent beacon. As they saw it, Sam Branch and his two companions reined their horses to a halt on the hogback overlooking the Mormons' camp.

The heady odor of crude petroleum cloyed their nostrils with its alien smell, put an oily taste on their tongues. Dimly seen through the purple night, the wreckage of Stebbins' well-drilling rig was half submerged by a spreading black lake fed by a spouting artesian well of liquid gold, gushing thickly toward the night sky.

"Dismount here," Sam Branch whispered. "If Krodie's down there, he'll shoot first and investigate visitors afterwards. I ain't sure the Gilroys are back from their elk-hunting trip yet. The old lady may be down in that tent all by herself."

As the three men moved down the slope they caught sight of the nester's horses outside the tent. One of them carried a bull elk's carcass, proof that Jeb Gilroy and Esta and the two boys were back.

And there were three other horses, ground-hitched out in front of the tent. Krodie's bunch. In all likelihood, the nesters had just returned to Quaker Basin.

With infinite stealth, the three men approached the sod-buster's tent. When they were within a dozen yards of the canvas structure they heard Jeb Gilroy's harsh voice lifted in angry defiance: "Kill us and be damned to you, Krodie. You won't live to sell a gallon of your filthy oil when Sam Branch finds out I deeded this section over to you."

Branch and the sheriff separated then, heading along opposite walls of the tent, leaving Jud Beck to cover the rear. They heard Ward Krodie's triumphant laughter as they met before the front fly of the tent.

"Come daylight," he was saying, "there won't be hide nor hair of your wagon, Gilroy. I know a quicksand bog over in the Warbonnets that'll hide your mudwagon and team and five of you Saints. Wyoming will think I bought you out and you drifted out of the country with the money I paid you for this oil well."

"Go ahead and get it over with, Krodie!" came Esta Gilroy's voice from the tent. "The Lord will punish you and your evil partners."

Sam Branch moved fast, then. Reaching out with his left hand, he swept back the canvas fly and pushed by the supporting tent pole, his six-gun swinging to cover the tense tableau grouped inside the tent.

Light from a lantern hanging from the ridge pole revealed Esta and her mother seated on a cot by the back wall, covered by Tubby Ford's six-guns.

Chuck and Radd, their arms trussed behind their backs with lariat ropes, sat huddled on a trunk under the menace of Dick Jessup's rifle.

Jeb Gilroy, a bottle of ink and a writing tablet on the table before him, sat facing the front entrance. At his back was Ward Krodie, holding a Colt .45 in his right hand while his left was in the

act of stuffing a sheet of paper into his coat.

In the space of a clock-tick, Sam Branch sized up the lay of the land. Then guns broke into action.

Ward Krodie whipped up his Colt for the first shot, his slug ripping a slot in the canvas behind Sam Branch's crouched form. Then the Circle B man's .44 bucked and roared in his fist, his first two shots bracketing Jeb Gilroy's head to tunnel Krodie's chest.

Dick Jessup had his rifle up at hip level, aiming at Branch. But the gunman had no time to squeeze trigger. Roger Daw pushed through the tent fly beside Branch and the sheriff's guns got Jessup, his corpse falling between the two Gilroy boys on the trunk.

Tubby Ford, shielded from the line of fire by Krodie's toppling body, gave a hoarse bawl of terror and dived through the back fly of the tent. A single sharp crack of a gun out in the night told Branch that the coroner's gun had cut Ford's getaway short.

It was all over. In the space of three seconds, death had struck three men down, filling the tent with the acrid odor of burned gunpowder and spilling blood.

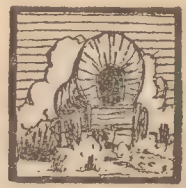
Branch was vaguely aware of old Jeb Gilroy kicking back his chair and stooping to jerk from Krodie's dead hand the deed he had just made out to the Quaker Basin oil strike. Sheriff Roger Daw moved past Branch, taking out a pocket knife and going to work on Chuck and Radd's bonds.

Esta and her mother groped forward through the smudging gunsmoke, pausing briefly to receive the old man's embrace. Then the girl was following Sam Branch out into the night.

They stood there together, speechless for a moment. Then the Circle B rancher waved an arm at the spreading black lake of crude oil which reflected the light of the Wyoming stars.

"Looks like you really found your pot of gold at Rainbow's End, Esta," Branch grinned. He paused, looking down into the girl's upturned face. And then, responding to an urge as old as man and woman itself, he pulled her into his arms and his lips sought hers. "And I hope I've found something a lot more precious than gold, Esta."

She remained close against his chest, and her innate shyness put far more into her answering whisper than the words expressed. "You have, Sam. . . . We both have."



Headliners in Next Month's Issue!

WITH blazing guns as his passport, the fighting Ranger known as El Halcon invades a Chisos stronghold of evil and trades bullet for bullet with conspiring owlhoots in RIDERS OF THE YUCCA TRAIL, the smashing Walt Slade novel by Bradford Scott coming next month. It's a humdinger packed with action from start to finish.

EXCITING is the word for THE BONANZA KING, Joseph Chadwick's colorful novelet of the mining country. It's the saga of Cowboy Jim Parrish—who looked just like a hobo, but certainly did not act like one when he went to Copperville to masquerade as the wealthy heir of a great mine property!

STEP-SONS OF DISASTER, by Gunnison Steele, is next on the list of next month's featured yarns. It's a rousing novelet in which you'll meet Johnny Buck—a hombre to whom cruelty and injustice are a call to action, regardless of any risks of life and limb involved. You'll enjoy this pulse-stirring narrative.

THERE will be outstanding short stories to round out a swell issue. Among them, GUNSMOKE'S HAPPY NEW YEAR, by Johnston McCulley, in which the merry tune of wedding bells is almost drowned out by sixgun roar when Gunsmoke Morgan comes back to his old diggin's. Look forward to the February THRILLING WESTERN!

SWITCHBACK SAVIOR

By CHARLES STODDARD

Sheriff Jack Harper goes out loaded for bear!

THE bright Montana mountain sun struck flashes from Jack Harper's star that reflected up the trail with the power of a miniature heliograph. But the star was not intended as a warning to wanted men; in fact if the sheriff had known how conspicuous it was, he probably would have unpinned it from his vest pocket and put it out of sight, for he was on his annual bear hunt, and the last thing he wanted was a tangle with the lawless.

All that crisp autumn morning his saddle horse had been plodding doggedly along the seemingly interminable set of switchbacks that zig-zagged back and forth up the steep side of Bull Elk Canyon. The chestnut horse was a strong close-coupled animal, but Sheriff Harper was a big-framed man, and with the .45-70 Winchester in the saddle boot, and the potent .45 Frontier Colt thonged low on his thigh, it was quite a load for any horse. The pack animal carrying his camp came along behind with contentedly flopping ears.

They were close to the top when the horses began to get tense and restless, and then Harper heard a high-pitched whining like a combination of a human humming and a twanging wire. The sheriff recognized it at once—bear. It was coming from a jumble of big rocks just under the canyon rim. He was down wind from the sound, and evidently the bear or bears had neither heard nor scented him.

The sheriff debated whether to go on up the trail and come at the quarry from the top or to dismount and clamber up the rocks. With a sharp thirty-foot slope between him and the switchback below, there was no room to maneuver. It would be more dangerous from below — these could be grizzlies—but if he went up top they'd probably scent him and be off for another county before he could be in a position to shoot. So he decided to clamber up through the rocks and take advantage of the wind.

Sheriff Harper

Harper had one foot out of the stirrup and was swinging a leg over the saddle when he saw a red streak appear on his horse's withers, felt something sting his thigh, heard the sharp crack of a rifle above on the rims. At the same time his horse reared and he was catapulted out of the saddle and went rolling down the slope to lie still as death in the trail below.

WHEN the sheriff came to and found himself lying in the dusty trail with the hot sun beating down on his hatless head, he felt as though he'd been run through a threshing machine. There was a dull painful throb in one shoulder, the bullet slash in his thigh was full of dirt and still trickling blood, and he had a blinding headache. He put a finger to a

big lump there and it came away bloody. He didn't know whether or not he could get up. His horses were not in sight. He closed his eyes again, and rested for a minute.

Next time he opened them a rider was coming around the turn of the switchback, and coming straight down toward him. He was leading Harper's saddle and pack horses. He was holding Harper's bear gun in front of him across the saddle fork. Harper felt for his .45. Naturally, it was not in the holster.

He knew who the man was, Tom Slade, one of the most vicious and cold-blooded of the wild bunch, a man who was wanted by the law in every state he'd ever lived in. His latest exploit had been the cold blooded and entirely unnecessary murder of two postal clerks in connection with a train robbery up on Tongue River. No one had heard from him since. Harper had done some chousing around on the case, but had found no sign of him, and guessed he'd headed south for warmer climes before the rugged Montana winter closed down.

Harper looked around desperately for his six-gun. He was afraid that if he moved, Slade would put a slug through him as nonchalantly as he'd spit over the cliff. When the outlaw was no more than fifteen feet away, the sheriff saw a gleam of metal around the corner of a stone under a blueberry bush about ten feet above his head. He focused on it and made out the outlines of his gun barrel. But it was too late, if he got up and reached for it, Slade would shoot him down before he could even point it at him.

The outlaw came to a halt. He got off and poked the sheriff with his toe. Harper got up on one elbow.

"Sheriff Harper, huh? I thought it might be you. Get up!"

Harper struggled to his feet and leaned dizzily against the canyon side. Faintly, almost a thousand feet below, the thunder of Bull Elk Creek came up to him in a whisper. He grabbed tightly onto a bush to keep himself from obeying the almost irresistible impulse to topple to his left and go spinning down into the canyon.

With the .45-70 breasted and ready, Slade looked him up and down with a hate-hot stare. His eyes paused on the empty holster. He relaxed a bit and started to play with Harper in the same viciously casual way that a cat plays with a mouse before killing it.

"Not that it's goin' to do yuh any good, Sheriff—but if I was huntin' badmen, I sure wouldn't advertise that I was a lawman. That star of yores was throwin' off flashes like a Roman candle."

"Fact is, Slade, I wasn't huntin' for you or anyone else. I just come up here to take a few days off and get myself a bear."

"In a way, yuh did," Slade said smugly. "Was yuh huntin' alone? Or is there someone else around. I'm curious about that. It's why I come way on into the canyon — aside from makin' sure that yuh're dead—which I'll do anyway—unless yuh tell the truth."

Sheriff Harper gulped, and his eyes shifted beyond Slade as a shadow fell on the slope behind the outlaw. Harper looked up. A bear was in the trail above sniffing the blood where his horse had been hit.

He looked back at Slade and gulped again. "No—no. I was alone. There was no one with me."

Slade's suspicious eyes narrowed. "I don't believe yuh," he said. He raised the rifle, and pointed it at Harper's chest.

"You tell me where you're pardner is in thirty seconds or I'll pull the trigger," he said.

The bear on the trail above was standing up, sniffing the wind. He was a huge grizzly, the most dangerous thing in the West.

"Why—uh—he's right behind you, up on the trail," the sheriff muttered.

For a moment Slade didn't move. He just stared suspiciously at the sheriff. There was no reason why he couldn't turn his back for an instant—with Harper unarmed, but he had a strong suspicion that the man was pulling his leg for some reason. The bear swayed from side to side. Slade saw the shadow move across the trail in front of him. He whirled, brought the rifle to his shoulder. As he did so, Harper started reaching for his six-gun under the blueberry bush. But Slade turned back quickly, and he resumed his position leaning against the bank just in time.

"Very, very smart ain't yuh?" Slade said slowly. "Thought yuh'd get my back turned and jump me. By the way, where's

yore six-gun?"

"Half-way down the canyon, I guess. Musta lost it when I got pitched off."

"M. vbe. But I'm not takin' any chances."

Slade backed up to his horse and took down the saddle rope. "Lie down," he commanded.

Sheriff Harper obeyed, and Slade tied his hands behind his back and lashed his feet. Then he turned deliberately around and took a careful bead on the bear's heart. He pulled the trigger of the powerful .45-70. The huge animal swayed back and forth once, and then plunged over the bank and came rolling down in an avalanche of stones and dust and broken bushes.

HE WAS headed straight for the horses. They snorted in fright and piled up in a tangle as they whirled back just enough to let the bear go hurtling across the trail and down into the canyon. Slade went to straighten the horses out, and when he turned back, he was looking into the little round hole in the business end of a Frontier Colt outlaw persuader. Sheriff Harper was holding it. His hands were free, the rope dangling around his tied legs.

Slade's eyes bugged out and he swallowed. "How in—how—"

"It just happens," Harper told him, "if you're interested, that I have by long practice developed the kind of hands that I can thin out and slip through most any knot. Especially that five-eighths Manila. You'd done better to have used a hoggin' string. And my gun was on the bank above me, caught in a blueberry bush. Now, Slade, get your hands up."

The Winchester rifle was leaning against the bank, but Slade was wearing a Colt butt forward high up at his waist for a speedy cross-draw. He knew this was the crisis for him. If ever a man of Sheriff Harper's reputation got him hog-tied, that would be the end. To be captured after making a big haul and then dodging around the high-country for weeks didn't appeal to him at all.

He hesitated only as long as it takes to breathe twice; then his right hand flashed across his body, and with a flick of the wrist his gun came out spitting flame and smoke — but aimlessly; for as he had thumbed back the hammer, Harper's slug had shattered his wrist. The gun had dropped from his hand as the hammer fell and discharged it. He grabbed his wrist, and held it, blood oozing from between his fingers. Then he turned pale and sat down slowly on the high side of the trail.

Sheriff Harper picked up Slade's gun and the bear rifle and put them out of reach. He took off his neckerchief, tied it around Slade's upper arm and twisted it into a tourniquet with a stick. Then he went to his pack mule, got out some clean cloths and bandaged the hand.

"Yuh may be a bad hombre, Slade," Sheriff Harper said, "but yuh got guts. I never thought yuh'd go for that gun."

"What did I have to lose?"

The outlaw was gray and exhausted. His eyes burned with suffering, but he gave no other sign that he was in pain. Sheriff Harper thought of the long bloody trail of crime behind this man. No miracle could save him from the gallows. But his mind was bleak with the thought.

"I guess yuh got nothin' to lose, son," he said gently. "But yuh mighta been a good man."

Slade turned hard again. "Cut the hogwash and let's get out of here," he said.

He mounted his horse. Harper got on his chunky mountain climber, and with the outlaw in front of him—minus his fangs—started home from his bear hunt.

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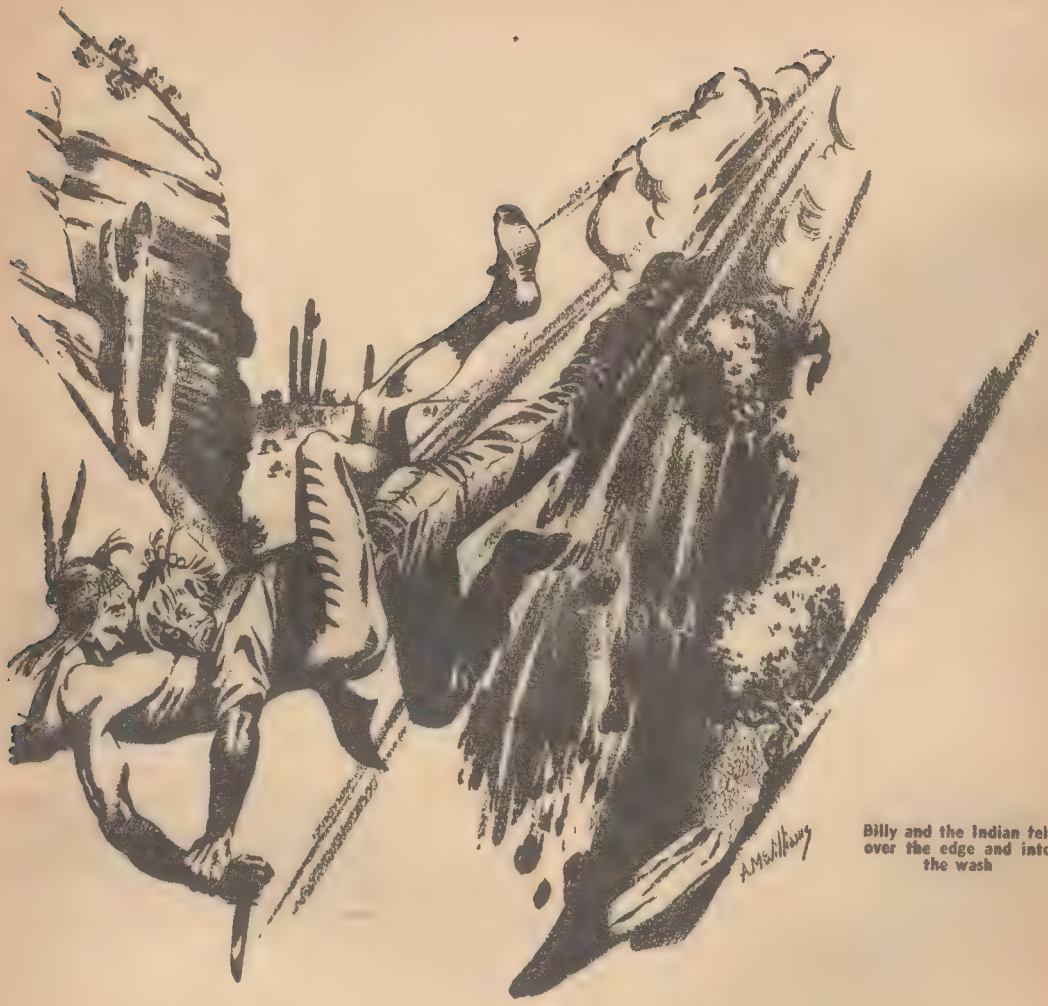

Billy and the Indian fell over the edge and into the wash

BIG MEDICINE

By JIM MAYO

A grizzled prospector pays a debt to the wily Apaches!

OLD BILLY DUNBAR was down flat on his face in a dry wash swearing into his beard. The best gold bearing gravel he had found in a year, and then the Apaches would have to show up!

It was like them, the mean, ornery critters. He hugged the ground for dear life and hoped they would not see him, tucked away as he was between some stones where an eddy of the water that once ran through the wash had dug a trench between the stones.

There were nine of them. Not many,

but enough to take his scalp if they found him, and it would be just as bad if they saw his burros or any of the prospect holes he had been sinking.

He was sweating like a stuck hog bleeds, lying there with his beard in the sand, and the old Sharps .50 ready beside him. He wouldn't have much of a chance if they found him, slithery fighters like they were, but if that old Sharps threw down on them he'd take at least one along to the Happy Hunting Ground with him.

He could hear them now, moving along the desert above the wash. Where in tarnation were they going? He wouldn't be safe as long as they were in the country, and this was country where not many white men came. Those few who did come were just as miserable to run into as the Apaches.

There were nine of them, the leader a lean muscled man with a hawk nose. All of them slim and brown without much meat on them the way Apaches were, and wearing nothing but breech clouts and headbands.

He lay perfectly still. Old Billy was too knowing in Indian ways to start moving until he was sure they were gone. He laid right there for almost a half hour after he had last heard them, and then came out of it cautious as a bear reaching for a honey tree.

When he got on his feet, he hightailed it for the edge of the wash and took a look. The Apaches had vanished. He turned and went down the wash, taking his time and keeping the old Sharps handy. It was a mile to his burros and to the place where his prospect holes were. Luckily, he had them back in a draw where there wasn't much chance of them being found.

BILLY DUNBAR pulled his old gray felt hat down a little tighter and hurried on. Jennie and Julie were waiting for him, standing head to tail so they could brush flies off each other's noses.

When he got to them he gathered up his tools and took them back up the draw to the rocks at the end. His canteens were full, and he had plenty of grub and ammunition. He was lucky that he hadn't shot that rabbit when he saw it. The Apaches would have heard the bellow of the old Sharps and come for him, sure. He was going to have to be careful.

If they would just kill a man it wouldn't be so bad, but these Apaches liked to stake a man out on an ant hill and let the hot sun and ants do for him, or maybe the buzzards—if they got there soon enough.

This wash looked good, too. Not only because water had run there, but because it was actually cutting into the edge of an old river bed. If he could sink a couple of holes down to bedrock, he'd bet there'd be gold and gold aplenty.

When he awakened in the morning he took a careful look around his hiding place. One thing, the way he was located, if they caught him in camp they couldn't get at him to do much. The hollow was perhaps sixty feet across, but over half of it was covered by shelving rock from above, and the cliff ran straight up from there for an easy fifty feet. There was water in a spring and enough grass to last the burros for quite some time.

After a careful scouting around, he made a fire of dead mesquite which made almost no smoke, and fixed some coffee. When he had eaten, Dunbar gathered up his pan, his pick, shovel and rifle and moved out. He was loaded more than he liked, but it couldn't be helped.

The place he had selected to work was the inside of the little desert stream. The stream took a bend and left a gravel bank on the inside of the elbow. That gravel looked good. Putting his Sharps down within easy reach, Old Billy got busy.

Before sundown he had moved a lot of dirt, and tried several pans, loading them up and going over to the stream. Holding the pan under the water, he began to stir the gravel, breaking up the lumps of clay and stirring until every piece was wet. Then he picked out the larger stones and pebbles and threw them to one side. He put his hands on opposite sides of the pan and began to oscillate vigorously under water, moving the pan in a circular motion so the contents were shaken

from side to side.

With a quick glance around to make sure there were no Apaches in sight, he tipped the pan slightly, to an angle of about 30 degrees so the lighter sands, already buoyed up by the water, could slip out over the side.

He struck the pan several good blows to help settle the gold, if any, and then dipped for more water and continued the process. He worked steadily at the pan, with occasional glances around until all the refuse had washed over the side but the heavier particles. Then with a little clean water, he washed the black sand and gold into another pan which he took from the brush where it had been concealed the day before.

FOR SOME time he worked steadily, then as the light was getting bad, he gathered up his tools, and concealing the empty pan, carried the other with him back up the wash to his hideout.

He took his Sharps and crept out of the hideout and up the wall of the canyon. The desert was still and empty on every side.

"Too empty, durn it!" he grumbled. "Them Injuns'll be back. Yuh can't fool an Apache!"

Rolling out of his blankets at sunup, he prepared a quick breakfast and then went over his takings of the day with a magnet. This black sand was mostly particles of magnetite, ilmenite, and black magnetic iron oxide. What he couldn't draw off, he next eliminated by using a blow box.

"Too slow, with them Apaches around," he grumbled. "A man workin' down there could mebbe do sixty, seventy pans a day, in that sort of gravel, but watchin' for Injuns ain't goin' t' help much!"

Yet he worked steadily, and by nightfall, despite interruptions had handled more than fifty pans. When the second day was over, he grinned at the gold he had. It was sufficient color to show he was on the right track. Right here, by using a rocker, he could have made it pay, but he wasn't looking for peanuts.

He had cached his tools along with the empty pan in the brush at the edge of the wash. When morning came, he rolled out and was just coming out of the hideout when he saw the Apache. He was squatted in the sand staring at something, and despite his efforts to keep his trail covered, Dunbar had a good idea what that something would be. He drew back into the hideout.

Lying on his middle, he watched the Indian get to his feet and start working downstream. When he got down there a little further, he was going to see those prospect holes. There would be nothing Dunbar could do then. Nor was there anything he could do now. So far as he could see, only one Apache had found him. If he fired, to kill the Indian, the others would be aware of the situation and come running.

Old Billy squinted his eyes and pondered the question. He had a hunch that Indian wasn't going to go for help. He was going to try to get Dunbar by himself, so he could take his weapons and whatever else he had of value.

The Indian went downstream further, and slipped out of sight. Billy instantly ducked out into the open and scooted down the canyon into the mesquite. He dropped flat there, and inched along in the direction the Indian had gone.

He was creeping along, getting nearer and nearer to his prospect holes, when suddenly, instinct or the subconscious hearing of a sound warned him. Like a flash, he rolled over, just in time to see the Indian leap at him, knife in hand!

Billy Dunbar was no longer a youngster, but he had lived a life in the desert, and he was hard and tough as whalebone. As the Apache leaped, he caught the knife wrist in his left hand, and stabbed at the Indian's ribs with his own knife. The Apache twisted away, and Billy gave a heave. The Indian lost balance. They rolled over, then fell over the eight foot bank into the wash!

Luck was with Billy. The Indian hit first, and Billy's knife arm was around him, with the point gouging at the Indian's back. When they landed, the knife went in to the hilt.

Billy rolled off, gasping for breath. Hurriedly, he glanced around. There was no one in sight. Swiftly, he clawed at the bank, causing the loosened gravel to cave down and in a few minutes of

hot, sweating work the Indian was buried.

Turning, Billy lit out for his hideaway and when he made it, he lay there gasping for breath, his Sharps ready. There would be no work this day. He was going to lie low and watch. The other Indians would come looking, he knew.

After dark he slipped out and covered the Indian better, and then used a mesquite bush to wipe out as well as possible, the signs of their fighting. Then he catfooted it back to the hollow and tied a rawhide string across the entrance with a can of loose pebbles at the end to warn him if Indians found him. Then he went to sleep.

At dawn he was up. He checked the Sharps and then cleaned his .44 again. He loaded his pockets with cartridges just in case, and settled down for a day of it.

LUCKILY, he had shade. It was hot out there, plenty hot. You could fry an egg on those rocks by ten in the morning—not that he had any eggs. He hadn't even seen an egg since the last time he was in Fremont, and that had been four months ago.

He bit off a chew of tobacco and rolled it in his jaws. Then he studied the banks of the draw. An Apache could move like a ghost and look like part of the landscape. He had known them to come within fifteen feet of a man in grassy country without being seen, and no tall grass at that.

It wouldn't be so bad if his time hadn't been so short. When he left Fremont, Sally had six months to go to pay off the loan on her ranch, or out she would go. Sally's husband had been killed by a bronc down on the Sandy. She was alone with the kids and that loan about to take their home away.

When the situation became serious, Old Billy thought of this wash. Once, several years before, he had washed out some color here, and it looked rich. He had left the country about two jumps ahead of the Apaches and swore he'd never come back. Nobody else was coming out of here with gold, either, so he knew it was still like he remembered. Several optimistic prospectors had tried it, and were never heard of again. However, Old Billy had decided to take a chance. After all, Sally was all he had, and those two grandchildren of his deserved a better chance than they'd get if she lost the place.

The day moved along, a story told by the shadows on the sides of the wash. You could almost tell the time by those shadows. It wasn't long before Dunbar knew every bush, every clump of greasewood or mesquite along its length, and every rock.

He wiped the sweat from his brow and waited. Sally was a good girl. Pretty, too, too pretty to be a widow at twenty two. It was almost midafternoon when his questing eye halted suddenly on the bank of the wash. He lay perfectly still, eyes studying the bank intently. Yet his eyes had moved past the spot before they detected something amiss. He scowled, trying to remember. Then it came to him.

There had been a torn place there, as though somebody had started to pull up a clump of greasewood, then abandoned it. The earth had been exposed, and a handful of roots. Now it was blotted out. Straining his eyes he could see nothing, distinguish no contours that seemed human, only that the spot was no longer visible. The spot was mottled by shadows and sunlight through the leaves of the bush.

Then there was a movement, so slight that his eye scarcely detected it, and suddenly the earth and torn roots were visible again. They had come back. Their stealth told him they knew he was somewhere nearby, and the logical place for him would be right where he was.

Now he was in for it. Luckily, he had food, water, and ammunition. There should be just eight of them unless more had come. Probably they had found his prospect holes and trailed him back this way.

There was no way they could see into his hollow, no way they could shoot into it except through the narrow entrance which was rock and brush. There was no concealed approach to it. He dug into the bank a little to get more earth in front of himself.

No one needed to warn him of the gravity of his situation. It was one

hundred and fifty miles to Fremont, and sixty miles to the nearest white man, young Sid Barton, a cowhand turned rancher who started running some cattle on the edge of the Apache country.

Nor could he expect help. Nobody ever came into this country, and nobody knew where he was but Sally, and she only knew in a general way. Prospectors did not reveal locations where they had found color.

Well, he wasn't one of these restless young coots who'd have to be out there tangling with the Apaches. He could wait. And he would wait in the shade while they were in the sun. Night didn't worry him much. Apaches had never cared much for night fighting, and he wouldn't have much trouble with them.

One of them showed himself suddenly—only one arm and a rifle. But he fired, the bullet striking the rock overhead. Old Billy chuckled. "Tryin' t' draw fire," he said, "get me located!"

BILLY DUNBAR waited, grinning through his beard. There was another shot, then more stillness. He lay absolutely still. A hand showed, then a foot. He rolled his quid in his jaws and spat. An Indian suddenly showed himself, then vanished as though he had never been there. Old Billy watched the banks cynically. An Indian showed again, hesitated briefly this time, but Dunbar waited.

Suddenly, within twenty feet of the spot where Dunbar lay, an Indian slid down the bank and with a shrill whoop, darted for the entrance to the hideaway. It was point blank, even though a moving target. Billy let him have it!

The old Sharps bellowed like a stricken bull and leaped in his hands. The Apache screamed wildly and toppled over backwards, carried off his feet by the sheer force of the heavy caliber bullet. Yells of rage greeted this shot.

Dunbar could see the Indian's body sprawled under the sun. He picked up an edged piece of white stone and made a straight mark on the rock wall beside him, then seven more. He drew a diagonal line through the first one. "Seven t'

[*Turn page*]

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go," he said.

A hail of bullets began kicking sand and dirt up around the opening. One shot hit overhead and showered dirt down almost in his face. "Durn you!" he mumbled. He took his hat off and laid it beside him, his six-shooter atop of it, ready to hand.

No more Indians showed themselves, and the day drew on. It was hot out there. In the vast brassy vault of the sky a lone buzzard wheeled.

He tried no more shots, just waiting. They were trying to tire him out. Doggone it—in this place he could outwait all the Apaches in the Southwest—not that he wanted to!

Keeping well below the bank, he got hold of a stone about the size of his head and rolled it into the entrance. Instantly, the shot smacked the dirt below it and kicked dirt into his eyes: He wiped them and swore viciously. Then he got another stone and rolled that in place, pushing dirt up behind them. He scooped his hollow deeper, and peered thoughtfully at the banks of the draw.

Jennie and Julie were eating grass, undisturbed and unworried. They had been with Old Billy too long to be disturbed by these—to them—meaningless fusses and fights. The shadow from the west bank reached farther toward the east, and Old Billy waited, watching.

He detected an almost indiscernible movement atop the bank, in the same spot where he had first seen an Indian. Taking careful aim, he drew a bead on the exposed roots and waited.

He saw no movement, nothing, yet suddenly he focused his eyes more sharply and saw the roots were no longer exposed. Nestling the stock against his shoulder, his finger eased back on the trigger. The old Sharps wavered, and he waited. The rifle steadied, and he squeezed again.

The gun jumped suddenly and there was a shrill yell from the Apache who lunged to full height, rose on his tiptoes, both hands clasping his chest. The stricken redskin then plunged face forward down the bank in a shower of gravel. Billy reloaded and waited. The Apache lay still, lying in the shadow below the bank. After watching him for a few minutes, alternating between the still form and the banks of the draw, Dunbar picked up his white stone and marked another diagonal white mark across the second straight line.

He stared at the figures with satisfaction. "Six left," he said. He was growing hungry. Jennie and Julie had both decided to lie down and call it a day.

AS luck would have it, his shovel and pick were concealed in the brush at the point where the draw opened into the wider wash. He scanned the banks suddenly, and then drew back. Grasping a bush, he pulled it from the earth under the huge rocks. He then took the brush and some stones and added to his parapet. With some lumps of earth and rock he gradually built it stronger.

Always he returned to the parapet, but the Apaches were cautious and he saw nothing of them. Yet his instinct told him they were there, somewhere. And that, he knew, was the trouble. It was the fact he had been avoiding ever since he holed up for the fight. They would always be around somewhere now. Three of their braves were missing—dead. They would never let him leave the country alive.

If he had patience, so had they, and they could afford to wait. He could not. It was not merely a matter of getting home before the six month period was up—and less than two months remained of that—it was a matter of getting home with enough money to pay off the loan. And with the best of luck it would require weeks upon weeks of hard, uninterrupted work.

And then he saw the wolf.

It was no more than a glimpse, and a fleeting glimpse. Billy Dunbar saw the sharply pointed nose, and bright eyes, then the swish of a tail! The wolf vanished somewhere at the base of the shelf of rock that shaded the pocket. It vanished in proximity to the spring.

Old Billy frowned and studied the spot. He wasn't the only one holed up here! The wolf evidently had a hole somewhere in the back of the pocket, and perhaps some young, as the time of year was right. His stillness after he finished work on the entrance had evidently fooled the wolf into believing the white man was gone.

Obviously, the wolf had been lying there, waiting for him to leave so it could come out and hunt. The cubs would be getting hungry. If there were cubs.

The idea came to him then. An idea utterly fantastic, yet one that suddenly made him chuckle. It might work! It could work! At least, it was a chance, and somehow, some way, he had to be rid of those Apaches!

He knew something of their superstitions and beliefs. It was a gamble, but as suddenly as he conceived the idea, he knew it was a chance he was going to take.

Digging his change of clothes out of the saddle bags, he got into them. Then he took his own clothing and laid it out on the ground in plain sight. The pants, then the coat, the boots and nearby, the hat.

Taking some sticks he went to the entrance of the wolf den and built a small fire close by. Then he hastily went back and took a quick look around. The draw was empty, but he knew the place was watched. He went back and got out of line of the wolf den, and waited.

The smoke was slight, but it was going into the den. It wouldn't take long. The wolf came out with a rush, ran to the middle of the pocket, took a quick, snarling look around and then went over the parapet and down the draw!

Working swiftly, he moved the fire and scattered the few sticks and coals in his other fireplace. Then he brushed the ground with a branch. It would be a few minutes before they moved, and perhaps longer.

Crawling into the wolf den he next got some wolf hair which he took back to his clothing. He put some of the hair in his shirt, and some near his pants. A quick look down the draw showed no sign of an Indian, but that they had seen the wolf, he knew, and he could picture their surprise and puzzlement.

Hurrying to the spring, he dug from the bank near the water a large quantity of mud. This was an added touch, but one that might help. From the mud, he formed two roughly human figures. About the head of each he tied a blade of grass.

[*Turn page*]

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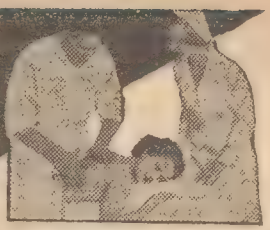

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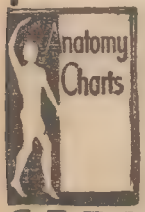

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Hurrying to the parapet for a stolen look down the draw, he worked until six such figures were made. Then, using thorns and some old porcupine quills he found near a rock, he thrust one or more through each of the mud figures.

They stood in a neat row facing the parapet. Quickly, he hurried for one last look into the draw. An Indian had emerged. He stood there in plain sight, staring toward the place!

They would be cautious, Billy knew, and he chuckled to himself as he thought of what was to follow. Gathering up his rifle, the ammunition, a canteen and a little food, he hurried to the wolf den and crawled back inside.

On his first trip he had ascertained that there were no cubs. At the end of the den there was room to sit up, topped by the stone of the shelving rock itself. To his right, a lighted match told him there was a smaller hole of some sort.

CAUTIOUSLY, Billy crawled back to the entrance, and careful to avoid the wolf tracks in the dust outside, he brushed out his own tracks, then retreated into the depths of the cave. From where he lay he could see the parapet.

Almost a half hour passed before the first head lifted above the poorly made wall. Black straight hair, a red headband, and the sharp, hard features of their leader.

Then other heads lifted beside him, and one by one the six Apaches stepped over the wall and into the pocket. They did not rush, but looked cautiously about, and their eyes were large, frightened. They looked all around, then at the clothing, then at the images. One of the Indians grunted and pointed.

They drew closer, then stopped in an awed line, staring at the mud figures. They knew too well what they meant. Those figures meant a witch doctor had put a death spell on each one of them.

One of the Indians drew back and looked at the clothing. Suddenly he gave a startled cry and pointed—at the wolf hair!

They gathered around, talking excitedly, then glancing over their shoulders fearsomely.

They had trapped what they believed to be a white man, and knowing Apach-

es, Old Billy would have guessed they knew his height, weight, and approximate age. Those things they could tell from the length of his stride, the way he worked, the pressure of a footprint in softer ground.

They had trapped a white man, and a wolf had escaped! Now they found his clothing lying here, and on the clothing, the hair of a wolf!

All Indians knew of wolf-men, those weird creatures who changed at will from wolf to man and back again, creatures that could tear the throat from a man while he slept, and could mark his children with the wolf blood.

The day had waned, and as he lay there, Old Billy Dunbar could see that while he worked the sun had neared the horizon. The Indians looked around uneasily. This was the den of a wolf-man, a powerful spirit who had put the death spell on each of them, who came as a man and went as a wolf.

Suddenly, out on the desert, a wolf howled!

The Apaches started as if struck, and then as one man they began to draw back. By the time they reached the parapet they were hurrying.

Old Billy stayed the night in the wolf hole, lying at its mouth, waiting for dawn. He saw the wolf come back, stare about uneasily, then go away. When light came he crawled from the hole.

The burros were cropping grass and they looked at him. He started to pick up a pack saddle, then dropped it. "I'll be durned if I will!" he said.

Taking the old Sharps and the extra pan, he walked down to the wash and went to work. He kept a careful eye out, but saw no Apaches. The gold was panning out even better than he had dreamed would be possible. A few more days—suddenly, he looked up.

Two Indians stood in plain sight, facing him. The nearest one walked for-

[*Turn page*]

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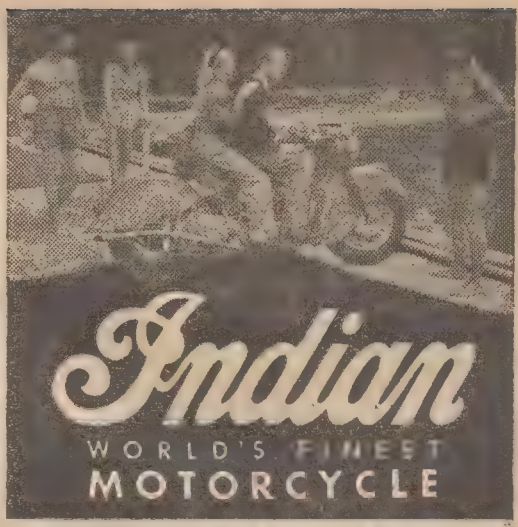

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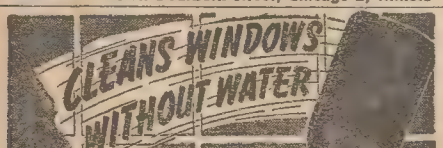

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ward and placed something on a rock, then drew away. Crouched, waiting, Old Billy watched them go. Then he went to the rock. Wrapped in a piece of tanned buckskin, was a haunch of venison!

He chuckled suddenly. He was big medicine now. He was a wolf-man. The venison was a peace offering, and he would take it. He knew now he could come and pan as much gold as he liked in Apache country.

A few days later he killed a wolf, skinned it, and then buried the carcass, but of the head he made a cap to fit over the crown of his old felt hat, and wherever he went, he wore it.

A month later, walking into Fremont behind the switching tails of Jennie and Julie, he met Sally at the gate. She was talking with young Sid Barton.

"Hi," Sid said, grinning at him. Then he looked quizzically at the wolfskin cap. "Better not wear that around here! Somebody might take you for a wolf!"

Old Billy chuckled. "I am!" he said. "Yuh're durned right, I am! Ask them Apaches!"

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 10)

They were big men, mostly, and they dressed in buckskin clothes, with wide belt at the waist. This belt would contain huntin' knives and maybe, firearms.

Were the Ladies Scared?

Now wouldn't you think the ladies would o' been scared to death o' these wild Mountain Men? Mebbe runnin' and hidin' their pretty faces 'til they'd done their carousin' and gone back to the wilds?

Well, that ain't how it was. The Indian women, and lots o' Mexican girls in their remote villages, was said to be crazy to follow these men. Mountain Men didn't take much to white girls, sayin' they were too "fofarrow," meanin' that they required too much in worldly goods to keep 'em happy.

The Mountain Men, nearly all, had squaws, sometimes more'n one at a time. And each man took a sort o' pride in dressin' up his woman in all the loud gaudy clothes she could put on her back. He liked to have a fine horse or mule for her to ride on. And she'd follow him anywhere, they say. On her part, if she was a good squaw she would dress her Mountain Man's pelts for him as he brought 'em in.

She made his moccasins, cooked his meals, and followed him anywhere in the wilderness he chose to go. The men o' the mountains called the bright, gaudy clothes and beads and such they bought for their women "fofarrow" from a French word they couldn't quite pronounce.

Brutal—but Brave

These wild men killed and scalped Indians at the drop of a hat—men, women or children, it was all the same. The poor Digger Injuns suffered 'specially hard at their hands.

Yet these men were not regarded as renegades and desperadoes. They were the bravest of the brave, sagacious in the strategy o' border wars, faithful to their own code, generous with friends, and frankly contemptuous o' caste or affectation. The Mountain Man was imperial in his self-respect, but granted equal rights to others.

Nope, the Mountain Men o' our western

[*Turn page*]

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frontier was a durned heap different from the so-called Hillbillys. With all their wild roughness, they were explorers, and trail makers, and I reckon deserve a niche in the nation's hall o' fame, eh, folks?

See you next month about the old Hitchin' Rail, fellahs and gals.

Buck Benson

OUR NEXT ISSUE

HIS real name was Walt Slade, but on the lips of a host of people in the old Southwest his title was *El Halcon*—The Hawk. If they were honest men, they spoke it with admiration, often almost with reverence, for The Hawk had many times brought his roaring guns to the rescue of the downtrodden and oppressed. If they were dishonest men, sinister figures, riders of the owlhoot, their lips twisted away from their teeth in hate bordering on fear as they muttered that name—*El Halcon!*

Walt Slade, as you who have read of his exploits are aware, was a valued and efficient member of that famed organization known as the Texas Rangers. Any man who carried the badge of the Rangers, a silver star set on a silver circle, was someone to make a renegade walk kind of slow and careful, because a Ranger rode with the power and the strength of the whole splendid organization behind him.

But there were Rangers and Rangers, and not many of them, fine as they were, had the wit and the skill and the gun speed to do single-handed what The Hawk could do. As undercover man for Captain Jim McNelty's company, he got some of the toughest lone wolf assignments ever handed to any hombre. Sometimes, too, pokin' out one rattler uncovers a whole den of 'em, all fanged and mad and ready to strike.

That was very much the situation when McNelty sent Slade down border-way to pry into the owlhoot activities of Curly Bill Edwards and his salty bunch of renegades. It turned out to be one of *El Halcon's* most thrilling adventures, and the whole story will be waiting for you in the next issue, under the title of RIDERS OF THE YUCCA TRAIL.

It's strange about some men, how things just seem to start happening the minute they arrive, and keep on happening until

they leave. Slade was such a man. He met Curly Bill Edwards on the long and tortuous Yucca Trail before he ever got to the town of Chino, where he was bound. But he didn't recognize the bandit! Score one for Curly Bill.

Then, in Chino, Slade rode right into a little party which was being staged by three cowboys, with a most unhappy hombre as guest, dragging on the end of a lariat.

Slade busted the lariat and the party both with a well-placed bullet, but then discovered that the three saddle gents were good hombres who maybe had some reason for their roping stunt.

Slade had come looking for Curly Bill Edwards, had passed the time of day with the outlaw and his bunch on the Yucca Trail, gone on into Chino—and run smack into what looked like one of the biggest land-grabbing plots the Southwest had ever seen. No, not the usual one of driving out nesters, or wrecking rival ranchers by running off their stock, drygulching and such. This grab was to be put over by due process of law—and, when and if it succeeded, every established rancher in the valley would be nothing more than a renter, a vassal, in practical slavery to Manuel Peralta, Spanish owner of the huge Snake S ranch.

Peralta had the papers, he had the courts behind him, and it surely looked as if he had the whole population of one of the best and richest cattle areas of the southwest right where he wanted them. But to Walt Slade something smelled of skunk.

The skunk smell still persisted that evening when it had to compete with the acrid odor of drifting gunsmoke in the big Head-

[*Turn page*]

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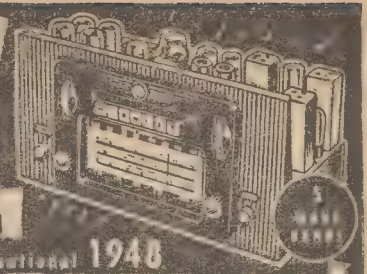

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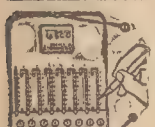

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light saloon and eating house. The man who had been looped and lugged along on the end of that lariat was one of Peralta's men, and Peralta barged up to the table where Slade and his three companions were eating. And what a ruckus began then! Fists and guns and knives went into action, and the walls bulged like bubble gum.

But Peralta had merely cooked up the argument as an excuse to get *El Halcon.* He didn't do it, not even with the aid of his knife-throwing henchman, but they had another try a few minutes later. Slade and his companions were leaving, and, to quote from the yarn itself:

They were just passing the open back door, Price slightly in the lead, when Slade shot out a long arm and swept the cowboy clean off his feet. In the same movement he bounded convulsively to one side.

The room rocked to the crashing double roar of a shotgun. Fire streamed through the door opening. Buckshot screamed past so close their breath fanned Slade's face. Ord yelled with pain as a stray pellet nicked his ear.

Both Slade's guns let go with a crackling boom. The slugs screeched through the door opening, thudded into the jamb. Slade bounded forward, ducking and weaving. He reached the door, slewed through it sideways, hugging the building wall. He was in a dark and narrow alley that backed the Headlight.

Flame gushed from the darkness. A bullet smacked into the wall. Slade fired at the flash, raking the alley from side to side, leaped back and crouched low against the wall. Somewhere in the darkness he could hear a queer tapping, as of bootheels beating a tattoo upon the ground. The noise quickly ceased, and all was quiet save for the pandemonium of yells and curses inside the saloon.

Well, when they brought a lamp and looked, it proved that Slade had gotten himself a snake. The dead man was the one who had tried to knife The Hawk in the saloon. He was one of Peralta's men and—on him he had a money belt full of new-minted twenty-dollar gold pieces. Just such gold pieces as had been taken shortly before in a stage holdup by Curly Bill Edwards and his gang. Hmmm! So maybe Peralta and Edwards were in cahoots.

You'll get the lowdown on all this, pals, in Bradford Scott's fine novel, RIDERS OF THE YUCCA TRAIL, in the next issue!

Then we come to a grand novelet, THE BONANZA KING, by Joseph Chadwick, runner up to the lead novel and plenty fast and exciting. This is a different kind of story. Jim Parrish, Dakota puncher, is

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Jim, with lovely Rita Shannon beside him, was honor guest in a parade when a rifleman tried to pick him off. The real Phil Carlin would have been a dead duck, right then, but Jim Parrish had his six-gun and he used it with deadly effect.

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Another featured yarn in the same issue will be Gunnison Steele's STEP-SONS OF DISASTER. Out in Arizona, young Johnny Buck and old Greenriver Ives tie into enough adventure to satisfy even their fight-lovin' hearts—almost. There's a mighty pretty girl in this story, too, and some of the saltiest humor you've laughed over in a long while.

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I like THRILLING WESTERN very much. Times when Walt Slade does not appear in a novel, why can't he appear in a novelet or short story?—*Bob Lipsyte, Walton Lake, Monroe, N. Y.*

Glad you like us, Bob—and we'll manage to see to it that Walt Slade and his adventures reach you pretty frequently in the pages of THRILLING WESTERN.

The only fault I can find with THRILLING WESTERN is you should have two issues a month instead of one. I can't imagine anyone finding fault with any of the stories in this magazine. I am eagerly waiting for more THRILLING WESTERN per month—*Wesley M. Quinn, Grants Pass, Ore.*

Thanks very much, Wesley, for the compliment. How about readin' some of our companion magazines between issues of THRILLING WESTERN? They're all packed with fine yarns!

I read of Black Jack Ketchum's career in one of your issues. Hadn't thought of him for years. I was living in Trinidad, Colorado, and of course there was quite a crowd at the depot to see him off after he had been released from the hospital. I was about fourteen years of age at that time. My name at the time of Black Jack's undoing was *Dorothy J. Walker.*

It must surely have been interesting, Dorothy, to have a ringside seat and see someone like that, whose name has gone

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Walt Slade is one of the best characters in western fiction, in my opinion. He asks no odds, takes no back talk, and yet he is always fair and square. He rides 'em straight up. Let's have many more stories about him—*Dave Enright, Chattanooga, Tenn.*

Right you are, Dave. It's men like Walt Slade, in fiction or in real life, that sort of set the example for the rest of us, isn't it?

Wouldn't it be something if only Walt Slade could perform on the radio with his fine singing voice and his guitar? The songs he sings sure do have nice words—real cow country songs, so you can almost smell the sage and hear it moving in the wind.—*Julie Linderman, Montreal, Canada.*

One grand hombre, that Walt Slade!

That's all for now, pals. But there will be another letter department in the next issue—and how about dashing off your contribution to it tonight? Address The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Many thanks, and the best to all of you!

—THE EDITOR

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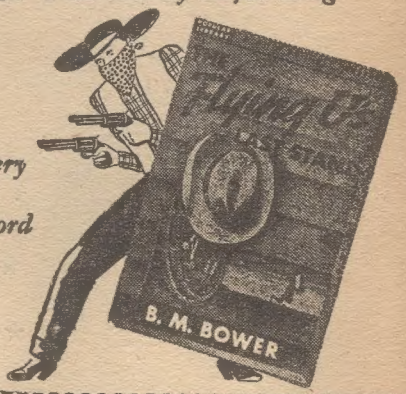

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